

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION & PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES: A QUALITATIVE
ANALYSIS ON THE ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCE OF NORTH AMERICAN WOMEN
COMPETING INTERNATIONALLY AT THE PROFESSIONAL INDOOR VOLLEYBALL
LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

Past research in intercultural communication and the acculturation process focuses little on the experiences of professional athletes. To increase scholarship in intercultural communication, this study explored how women playing indoor volleyball professionally experienced the acculturation process within international leagues, as well as how that process impacted their perception of their performance, adding another dimension and perspective to existing literature.

This exploration used phenomenological methodology to find major themes. In this study, seven professional indoor volleyball players from the United States and Canada, competing and living in Europe at the time, were interviewed. Participants were selected on whether or not they had signed a professional athletic contract overseas in women's indoor volleyball.

The analysis produced four themes of what athletes experienced during the acculturation process: 1) out of place; 2) relationships; 3) expectations; 4) foreigners vs. locals and one theme of how that process affected their perceived performance: 5) initial adjustment, which included adjusting to differences in coaching style and level of league.

The overall acculturation experience of the athletes was challenging but rewarding. The first theme out of place described how the majority of athletes experienced the feelings of discomfort, confusion and awkwardness when interacting with the host culture. The second theme relationships describes the impact of relationships on the athlete, how athletes interact with their support system from home and with relationships in the host culture. The third theme expectations highlights the standards of performance the professional team's coach and managers have for the seven professional athletes interviewed. The fourth theme foreigners versus locals demonstrates the division of athletes that occurs on each participants professional team. The foreigners consist of any team members not from the host country and the locals are team members from the host country. The final theme, initial adjustment, which consisted of differences in coaching style and level of league, showed factors that contributed to a change in perceived performance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“My entire life I dreamed of being a professional athlete, and that was my ultimate goal—to make the national team and play professionally... it’s a difficult life to live. But it means a lot to me, especially just ‘cause I know I’m making the younger version of myself proud.”

— Autumn, **Turkey**

In the 2014/2015 high school year, volleyball surpassed basketball in overall participation in young women in the United States (NFHS, 2015). Two years following this, there were almost thirty five thousand more young women participating in volleyball than basketball. Since 2010, basketball participation has decreased by over twenty seven thousand, while volleyball has increased by over forty six thousand. This makes volleyball the fastest growing team sport for young women, second of all sports in overall participation behind the individually-focused track and field (NFHS, 2015). Playing volleyball provides post-secondary opportunities to young women to have their education completely or partially funded through scholarships, network among other athletes and athletic program donors, as well as potentially compete professionally following college. Playing professionally allows athletes to play their sport as a career, receiving compensation for their athletic ability. It is a highly valuable experience that only 3.9% of all young women who play high school volleyball get to experience (NCAA, 2018). To put it in perspective, only 17,387 of 444,779 young women went on to play at the collegiate level after high school in the 2017/2018 school year (NFHS, 2018; Irick, 2018).

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is “member-led organization dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes” (NCAA, 2019). It is an organization that oversees the process of recruiting players to ensure their safety and well-being by implementing rules for colleges, coaching staff and athletes to follow while the athlete is in high school and while the athlete is enrolled at the institution. While collegiate teams have the NCAA to protect the athletes, professional volleyball has the International Volleyball Federation (FIVB). According to the FIVB code of conduct, players are considered members of the FIVB organization and must be treated according to Code of Conduct guidelines (FIVB, 2004). Much like the NCAA, these FIVB guidelines include protecting the athletes’ well-being, physical and mental health. NCAA rules create a process for student-athletes while transitioning from high school to collegiate athletics and better prepares the student-athlete for what to expect as a collegiate athlete. The transition from collegiate volleyball to professional international volleyball is more complicated than the transition from high school to collegiate athletics in America due to the majority of professional volleyball opportunities being overseas. Within the FIVB Code of Conduct and Sports Regulations, there are no guidelines to for athletes to aid in the transition from one culture to another (FIVB, 2018). In past empirical research, there is little analysis conducted on the athletes acculturation experience. This can potentially find a new dimension of acculturation to add to existing cultural research.

In this thesis I examine the experiences of seven North American women and their transition to live and compete professionally in indoor volleyball leagues overseas in a country other than their own. In other words, the acculturation process of these women are analyzed. The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of the current intercultural experience of North Ameri-

can women competing internationally in indoor volleyball and determine what themes emerge during their acculturation experience. The study also explores whether the ease or difficulty of the acculturation process affects the athlete's perceived athletic performance.

As one of the fastest growing team sport for young women in North America (NCAA, 2019), the opportunity to play professionally overseas continues to grow, emphasizing the current gap in athlete-focused acculturation studies. In order to grasp an understanding of this, this study harnessed a phenomenological approach by using semi-structured interviews to allow participants to share experiences important to them. The data was analyzed for apparent themes across participants' experiences to answer the following research questions:

1.1 Research Questions:

RQ1: What is the acculturation experience of North American women playing professional volleyball while living and competing overseas in a different host culture and high performing culture?

and

RQ2: How does the ease or difficulty of acculturation affect the athlete's perceived level of athletic performance?

This introductory section introduced the growth of indoor volleyball within young women in high school and how it provides opportunities for women into college and beyond into professional athletic careers. It outlines the simple transition from high school to college and the lack of knowledge in the transition from collegiate athletics to a professional career. In order to

analyze the unique experience of these athletes, a phenomenological approach is applied to cultivate rich, qualitative data through semi-structured interviews where participants share memories and thoughts most significant to them. Before past literature on the acculturation process and related studies in culture shock and organizational culture are explained, the following section will define the key terms that appear throughout this study.

1.2 Definition of Key Terms

Professional athlete

An important distinction in this study is the difference between the collegiate athlete and the professional athlete since we are analyzing the less explored experience of an athlete's post-collegiate career. In this study, professional athletes will be defined as athlete's who receive compensation for their athletic ability to perform on a team within a national and/or international professional league, as paraphrased from the top two consistent definitions in over 91 studies analyzed by Swann, Morgan, and Piggott (2015).

Athletic performance

A professional athlete is someone who receives compensation for their athletic performance. Some describe athletic performance as a variable in determining the victory of the contest (Jones & Howe, 2005), while others say it is the measurement to compare competitors (Loland, 2002). As Carwyn Jones and Cassie Wilson (2009) concluded,

...the main ingredient in sport, namely athletic performance, is a complex and multifaceted one that is neither easily specifiable nor measurable. Each individual sport has

its own conception of the range of skills and abilities to be tested when trying to secure victory, (131).

Due to the multifaceted nature of performance, in this study athletic performance will be defined as the athlete's perception of their ability to execute skills, game plans and adjustments. This perception is an individual analysis of whether the athlete believes they did well in competition and practice, by reflecting on their execution of cognitive and physical skills during competition or practice.

Host Culture

Since this study is centered around the acculturation process of adjusting from one culture to another, culture must be defined. This thesis will use Cruickshank and Collins' (2012) definition, where they consider culture to be "a dynamic process characterized by the shared values, beliefs, expectations and practices across the members and generations of a defined group" (p.340). In this thesis, there will be two separate cultures the athletes are exposed to during their transition, the host culture of the country they are competing in and the high performing culture they are training and playing in.

High performing culture

Professional athletes receiving compensation for their athletic ability perform at a high level and because of this, the culture of the training facility in which they practice or play reflects that high level of skill. This thesis also uses their concept of "high performing" culture where group members' have shared values, beliefs, expectations, and practices that "a) support sus-

tained optimal performance; b) *persist* across time in the face of variable results (i.e., wins, losses, ties); and, most importantly, c) lead to *consistent* high performance” (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, p.5). This high performing culture can also be called gym culture. This definition is necessary to portray that the athletes are adjusting to both a new host culture and high performing culture when continuing their athletic career overseas.

Acculturation

In an in-depth review of acculturation literature, Lakey (2003) uncovers how acculturation can have multiple definitions, depending on the perspective it is being studied through. In this thesis, the acculturation process will be explained using Kim’s (1982) definition, where it is defined as:

an interactive and continuous process that evolves in and through the communication of an immigrant with the new sociocultural environment. The acquired communication competence, in turn, reflects the degree of that immigrant’s acculturation (p380).

Therefore, acculturation is simply the adjustment process an individual goes through while relocating to a new place or space of culture. The success of acculturation depends on multiple communication-based factors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

So the first practice I showed up, it was the first day, and it was all German, so that was kind of crazy too, because I never learned any German. I was pretty lost.

Hailey, **Spain** (reflecting on her experience in Austria)

The experience transitioning from one culture to another—the acculturation process—gives insight on what to expect from athletes transitioning into a new host culture and high performing culture. The acculturation process and studies on organizational culture are highlighted in the literature review to provide an understanding on high-performing culture and a background on what has been done in the study of acculturation. First, acculturation is covered to provide a better understanding of the main process being analyzed in this study. Following that, organizational culture will give insight to how a team operates together, and the impacts of positive and negative environments on the individuals within it. Literature on culture shock—a significant part of the acculturation process—is highlighted next. Culture shock literature mainly focuses on the experiences of international students, Americans traveling abroad for work, and less often international student athletes competing in American colleges. Studies on international students and Americans traveling abroad for work analyze individuals experiencing a new culture and their results serve as insight for what to look for in and compare to the experiences of North American women who play professional volleyball overseas. In each population, the acculturation process gave individuals difficulty, especially at the beginning of their transition. Finally, the literature review will end with the limited intercultural studies on athletes to show how

this process has affected populations of international athletes coming from overseas to play in North America in college or North American professional leagues. These few studies show unique factors of the athlete's acculturation process and suggested that changes in performance were due to cultural changes. Blount's (2012) study specifically inspired RQ2's focus on acculturations effect on perceived performance. Understanding what has been done in athlete-focused intercultural communication studies emphasizes the lack of experiences represented and the gaps that need to be filled to create general themes in this experience.

In order to understand the acculturation process, culture must first be understood. The following section briefly defines culture, and why it is significantly more comfortable to operate in one that you are used to living in.

2.1 An understanding of culture

An individual can find comfort and acceptance within culture. One finds comfort within a cultural group in which they identify and feel safe with. These spaces can be the culture one grew up in or one they sought out in order to find acceptance.. Culture functions to create a predictable world for the individual within it (Becker, 1962). It is predictable, because often, the individual identifies with the culture, spends time in it, learns what verbal and nonverbal interactions are used, when and how to behave and what to expect from the environment.

Heider (1958) explains that interacting with others within the same culture seems easy and automatic—almost everything makes sense within it. They know how their behavior will effect themselves and others and there is little need to defend opinions and values, because those within the culture often share similar beliefs. This ease disappears when one is placed into a new

culture. For the women who compete internationally in professional indoor volleyball overseas, they are experiencing both a change in host culture as well as high performing culture. In order to gain a better understanding of this transition, this study explores the acculturation experience of these athletes and whether or not that experience affects their perceived performance while playing.

The following section will describe the theoretical backbone of this study, the acculturation process, in more depth to show the impacts that a change in culture can have on an individual.

2.2 Applying theory: The Acculturation Process

Humans have travelled from culture to culture for many decades - some visits successful and most, unfortunately, created deep misunderstanding between the visitors' and host cultures' way of living. Historically, intercultural interactions are complex the brutish history is recognized but is out of scope for this thesis. Acculturation is not a new phenomenon, but the study of it is relatively new. In an in-depth review of acculturation literature in intercultural communication, Lakey (2003) uncovers how acculturation can have multiple definitions, depending on the perspective it is being studied through. In this thesis, the acculturation process will be explained using Kim's (1982) definition, where it is defined as:

an interactive and continuous process that evolves in and through the

communication of an immigrant with the new sociocultural environment. The

acquired communication competence, in turn, reflects the degree of that immigrant's acculturation. (p380)

This definition shows how acculturation is a communication-based process that places a lot of salience on the intercultural contact between a visitor and the host culture. This process will be referred to, to describe the transition North American women experience playing professional indoor volleyball internationally. The acculturation process can result in affecting the state of the individual experiencing the change, creating culture shock. Barna (1976) defines culture shock as "a state of dis-ease" (p.1) where, when affected, different people experience different effects, degrees of severity, and lengths of time in which this state lasts. "Few escape it altogether, but many people who are handicapped by its presence don't recognize what's bothering them, or even that they're not acting like themselves" (Barna, 1976, p.1). Small differences in culture create feelings of discomfort while the individual lacks knowledge of how to exist in a new environment and as Barna explains, it can affect individuals minimally or excessively. This applies to professional athletes experiencing a new culture for the first time as well. Toffler (1971) stated this condition "causes a breakdown in communication, a misreading of reality, an inability to cope"(p.13). So if experiencing culture shock can lead to a break down in communication, it could create further discomfort and hinder the rate of adjustment or acculturation. If culture shock symptoms are severe, professional athletes who travel overseas to compete in a new cultures could lose their jobs if they are unable to cope with the changes. Minor culture shock symptoms also can also present challenges to the individual.

It is the hidden stress of being constantly on guard against sending and receiving inaccurate or inappropriate messages in a strange culture... All tension and energy-saving devices that one's own culture provides are absent... Fatigue is a natural result from such a continuing state of alertness... To relax in such a setting is to be vulnerable. (Barna, 1976, p.5)

The professional athlete is adjusting to both the host culture as well as the high performing culture so even minor culture shock symptoms could build up over time and affect their well-being and potentially performance if they are unable to adjust.

Experiencing a new culture is not confined to relocating to a new country or geographical region, but can also be applied to starting a new job. Working with a new organization can be uncomfortable and awkward at first as one gets used to new colleagues and the employers' leadership style. A person does not have much knowledge about how the organization or program is run until he or she arrives on site. This consideration can be applied to multiple situations where a person has uprooted themselves from one culture to another and the side effects of this change in lifestyle can range from insignificant to severe. The feeling of constant tension and increased vulnerability associated with culture shock can be applied to being immersed within a new national culture as well as a new organizational culture or the high performing culture within athletics. The majority of elite athletes that have the capability to compete professionally after collegiate careers continue their athletic career overseas, where the likelihood of experiencing culture shock—both within the new country and within the new team—is higher.

This section on the acculturation process highlights the importance of communication within the acculturation process, and how one's ability to communicate either increases or de-

creases the level of culture shock—or discomfort—they feel. Culture shock can be subtle discomfort to extreme homesickness and confusion when interacting with a new culture. Even the subtlest culture shock symptoms can impact a person's well-being. Acculturation was covered to give a better understanding of the process as well as the potential implications of a negative experience. It is important to understand different dimensions of the acculturation process to provide more data to broader populations, which is why this study is exploring the experiences of athletes.

In order to gain a better understanding of the high-performing culture, the next section will highlight studies done in organizational cultures. Organizational culture covers different groups of people and shows how a positive or negative group environment can affect the team members within it. The factors that contribute to a positive or negative experience in these studies could be indicative of the factors that also affect the experiences of athletes in a high performing culture. The following section on organizational culture will cover literature highlighting the significance a positive group culture has on the well-being of the team members within it.

2.2 How organizational culture can relate to the athlete

A person's culture is where they feel a level of comfort or at the least have knowledge of what behaviors to expect and as one builds more connections, they slowly increase the amount of cultural groups they are a part of, whether it be in work or extra-curricular activities. Many people belong to more than one culture. Whether it is their family culture, their town culture or their work culture, each of them is unique, having its own set of invisible rules and values. Similarly to a person's work culture is the athlete's team culture they are a part of. The athlete is an individual

who is a part of a group—or team—of people in which they must cooperate and work well with in order to accomplish the group goals. In past studies, many researchers refer to a work or team culture as organizational culture, which has many similarities to a sports team culture. Wallach (1983) argued that, “organizational culture is the shared understanding of beliefs, values, norms, and philosophies of how things work” (p5) and a strong organizational culture improves employees’ productivity by motivating them towards achieving a common goal and objective (Schein, 1990; Voon, Lo, Ngui & Ayob 2011). This section will cover three main pieces of literature to that exemplify the importance of a good organizational culture and how it is cultivated. First, Weese’s (1995) study on the importance of togetherness, respect and family feel in creating a positive group culture. Second, Cresswell and Eklund (2007) shows how burnout syndrome—exhaustion and lack of motivation—in athlete’s is associated with weak relationships that lack communication, honesty and openness. Finally, this section will end with Cruikshank (2013) conclusions on how team culture must be cultivated from the team members themselves to be authentic and impactful.

Weese (1995) shows the importance of organizational culture in teams or groups of people—specifically at the administrative level—stating that when lead by inspired staff, where they promoted the importance of togetherness, respect, and a family-like atmosphere, it increased team members’ belief in the organizations mission and goals. Although this study was conducted in sport administration, it shows how leadership can affect an organization as a whole. As sports teams have similar structures as corporate teams, this organizational culture is applicable to a sports team culture, where athletes also must communicate to work together as a team. How a team interacts and communicates directly impacts an athlete’s work environment, which poten-

tially affects their well-being and performance. The sense of a family-like atmosphere with respect created a space that improved employee belief and comfort. This study shows how the organizational culture can shift the mood of the individuals involved. The potential implications of Weese's study for professional athletes is the quality of organizational culture—in areas such as leadership, respect and togetherness—can significantly impact the cohesiveness of a team. If high performing culture operated similarly and cultivated respect and relationships amongst its members, it has the potential to alleviate culture shock among individuals.

One of the initial studies that pairs organizational culture with sport was a sport psychology qualitative study done over 12 months on New Zealand Rugby players and a few of the team staff members. Cresswell and Eklund (2007) analyzed the factors related to burnout syndrome, Burnout syndrome is defined as depersonalization, and reduced satisfaction in performance (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). It was found that each player showed signs that resembled burnout syndrome, which were heavily associated with weak relationships with both teammates and management, with “poor communication, honesty and a lack of openness highlighted by the players” (Wagstaff et. al., 2018; Cresswell et al., 2007). Understanding how to communicate was not a priority in this organization, and because of it, players experienced negative physical and mental affects. Cresswell and Ekland's (2007) study participants experienced a negative organizational culture. Although each of the participants were from the same country and had similar cultural behaviors, cues and language, the group still didn't operate positively or effectively. If each player is from a different culture, the natural communication and culture barriers could pose as an issue to the cohesiveness of the team. If burnouts can happen within a team with one dominant culture due to lack of a good high performing culture, the possibilities with a diverse group

present even more challenges. This is relative to many international professional teams as they are made up of players from a mixture of cultures. The cultivation of a good team culture becomes even more important in a diverse group, as it could affect performance, mental health, acculturation and culture shock symptoms. Much of the existing research on organizational culture in sport is focused on using this knowledge for competitive advantage reasons within the administrative and psychological areas than the actual organizational culture within sports teams (Wagstaff et al, 2018). Cruikshank (2013) also analyzes organizational and team culture and found that a good culture cannot only be requested or imposed by management, but it must be endogenous—where change comes from within the team and program as a whole. Despite that, through management-organized team bonding and focus on creating “group-generated and regulated values, standards, and practices” (Cruikshank, 2013), team culture can be manipulated by creating an endogenous change. This is significant because if management of professional international teams could manipulate endogenous change within their teams, then overall high performing culture could improve and positively affect the athletes. These studies show how the culture surrounding team members are significant and affects the experience of those members.

This section on organizational culture highlighted the importance of a positive team culture on athlete’s well-being. Weese’s (1995) study on the importance of togetherness, respect and family feel in creating a positive group culture. Cresswell and Eklund (2007) showed how burnout syndrome—exhaustion and lack of motivation—in athlete’s is associated with weak relationships that lack communication, honesty and openness. Cruikshank concluded that a positive culture must be created by the team for it to be authentic, but that it can be manipulated by management by imposing team-bonding activities that produce a good team culture. These three

readings provide insight into what an organizational culture is, how it works and how the important considerations in past research can be related to a the high performing culture of professional athletes. A significant difference in this study's participant group is that they are being introduced to a new high performing culture as well as a new host culture at the same time.

Adapting to a culture other than one's own, as well as maintaining a high quality performing culture within the team is ideal for an athlete living and competing abroad in a country other than their own. Studying the first-person experience of athletes competing abroad could help determine the communication differences that create a state of culture shock within international professional volleyball athletes during their unique acculturation process. Past research seldom represents the professional athlete experience. In order to have more of an understanding regarding the experiences and effects of interacting with another culture on an individual, the following section will give a brief overview of previous research analyzing culture shock amongst other populations, including a handful of studies regarding a different athletic participant population than what this thesis aims to analyze. The next section will provide details of past literature on the acculturation process of the unique experiences of international students, Americans traveling abroad for work and international athletes competing in North American leagues or colleges.

2.3 International Students, Americans abroad and Athletes

When looking at the acculturation process, some groups are analyzed more within empirical research than others. If there is one group that is studied the most in-depth regarding culture

shock, it is international students (Ward, Bochner, Furnham, 2001). Due to their youth and the abrupt change in culture, they tend to explain that their experience studying abroad is an life-altering event (Kim, 2001). Specifically the beginning of international students' transition to a new culture causes strong emotional experiences that they have to adjust to, including an unknown environment, and different academic organization, standards, and protocols (Brown & Holloway, 2008). This information can give insight in what to expect from athletes also experiencing acculturation and compare whether or not athletes also feel strong emotional experiences during the beginning of their transition to a new culture. Lin (2007) concluded in her study of Chinese International students in the United States that culture shock is determined and based on context and "its dimensions differ across time and space" (p2). The difference in dimensions of culture shock and the acculturation process make the analysis of different situations and experiences salient in understanding how the process differs across these dimensions. Culture shock studies regarding international students also address coping methods as well as factors that improve or worsen the state of culture shock. Choi et. al (2014) found that Asian international students in Korea who reported experiencing stress due to acculturation were more likely to be depressed. Other contributions to the field also include the acculturation experience of Americans traveling to work abroad. Ma's (1999) research has shown that American employees within global corporations fail to complete assignments in other countries because of failing to acculturate to their surrounding. Truax (2008) conducted a workplace study on employees' experience working abroad and gathered data on the factors that contribute to a successful intercultural interaction that lessens the severity of culture shock. The participants of this study had worked abroad on multiple occasions and during qualitative interviews discussed their cultural experience while

working in another culture. An individual has expectations—conscious or not—before they are surrounded by a new culture. Expectations that can lead to misunderstandings and conflict between the visitor and the host culture (Wynder-Quainoo, 2015). These negative interactions can cause a state of dis-ease and potentially culture shock. In Traux's study, the key to a positive international experience is "being able to accept the challenge of fully emerging one's mind and body into another culture... [and] the importance of developing relationships while working with individuals from other cultures" (Truax, 2008, p.8). Ridding oneself of expectations and being open-minded can aid in facilitating positive interactions and forming solid relationships which help the visitor create a foundation in the host culture. Similarly, Lin's (2007) earlier study concluded that student organizations are incredibly important in helping students deal with culture shock symptoms and learn how to interact cross-culturally by giving social support. These research findings stress the importance of quality relationships and understanding how to interact with others during the acculturation process to reduce symptoms of culture shock. By studying the experiences of athletes overseas, this study can add a new dimension to existing research on the acculturation process that either supports the existing themes or provides new insight.

These empirical observations should be considered when critically analyzing the factors that contribute to a pleasant experience abroad playing professional volleyball. Professional sport contracts can be comparable to working and learning abroad. The challenges and expectations of working successfully abroad can be comparable to the pressure of performing athletically in a new environment, because the professional athlete is being compensated to perform despite the cultural change, similar to an employee in a management position being compensated to perform despite the culture change. Failure to adjust and become comfortable within a new culture can

lead to disparities in performance and well-being, including increased stress and potential termination (Ma, 1999). Although similar, the specific analysis of athletics abroad has rarely been explored, and this study would prove to fill a gap in the culture shock and intercultural communication areas of research.

The limited studies on athletes regarding acculturation and culture shock explore similar themes to the more widely explored studies, such as international students, and applies them to the athlete experience. Empirical research specifically addressing culture shock and athletes is limited and tends to focus on international or foreign athletes' experiences in North America. The actual study of athletes regarding acculturation and culture shock is a relatively new development in recent years (Ryba, 2017) and although general themes of cultural adaptation have been discussed, there is still a gap of knowledge of personal experience regarding culture change and shock (Rempel, 2011), which researchers are calling to change (Schinke, 2016). Research on the acculturation of experience of athletes in general is limited and the experience of the professional athlete even more so. This study contributes to the field by exploring the personal acculturation process experienced by a specific group of professional athletes playing internationally.

An example of one of the few culture shock studies done on athletes is Blount's (2012) quantitative study on foreign student-athletes at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM). This study used a survey to analyze factors, like stress, physical strain, and homesickness, and how they are associated with culture shock. Although the authors did not determine the number of athletes who showed culture shock symptoms, their study asked how athletes' performance statistics in games changed since coming to the UHM. This question is uniquely important be-

cause it asks about information regarding athletic performance and the athletes' opinion of the reason behind the change. Although a change in athletic statistics could occur for multiple reasons—like the level of conference opponents, level of teammates, playing time, etc.—it is one of the first studies to suggest that a change of culture could affect athletic performance. Among the student-athletes that participated, 41.2% of them “reported that their athletic statistics decreased, six felt that it was due to ‘Homesickness and Culture Shock,’ five cited ‘Coaching Staff and Teammates,’ and three attributed it to new ‘Climate and Rules/Regulations’” (Blount, 2012, p. 87). This observation portrays that, in the athletes' opinions, their athletic performance is affected by changes in host culture and high performing culture. Blount's study shows the impact of relocating on an athletes performance—an area rarely studied—and inspired RQ2 in this study which explores professional athletes' perceived performance while going through the acculturation process. This study works to fill the gap of the experience and implications of the acculturation process for athletes but through the perspective of a North American woman competing at the international indoor volleyball level.

Schinke (2013) was successful in identifying key issues about the acculturation process of immigrant athletes. He conducted in-depth interviews and determined two major themes in respondents in which there are two perspectives that are affected by the introduction of a individual in a new culture. The first perspective is the athletes' navigation “between cultural norms of the home community and the host community.” (p.1676) The second brought up the idea of acculturation loads. An acculturation load can either be a two-way process—which suggests that the visitors to a culture and people of the host culture share the acculturation process—or a one-directional process, which suggests that the visitors “[manage] the load with or without support

from others” (Schinke, 2013, p.1676). Schinke’s study is important because it is one of the first studies done on elite athletes experiencing the acculturation process. It explains how acculturation is constant and that one must continuously adjust in a culture other than their own. Although Schinke’s study is a starting point at understanding the different factors that apply to the experience of high level professional athletes, it gives only one dimension out of many and more in-depth studies can be done to round out the area of acculturation and athletes. Qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted on the experiences of immigrant students and athletes coming to North America, but little is cultivated on the professional athlete, let alone the North American athlete competing and living abroad. The closest examples to compare the potential conclusions of the North American athlete experience with acculturation are studies that analyze Americans working abroad. Although similar topics of discussion are possible among participants of Americans working abroad and athletes competing abroad, their careers and job expectations are very different.

The overall limited research on the acculturation experiences of athletes competing abroad creates a gap in literature in a growing career option for high level athletes. The knowledge created by analyzing this further would help create an understanding of specific factors that impact the athlete’s well-being and performance and provide an opportunity to compare and contrast with other acculturation studies. If utilized and applied, this knowledge has potential to help improve the quality of life and careers of athletes traveling abroad to compete, helping better prepare athletes for what challenges to expect. This knowledge can also be added to literature regarding intercultural communication, culture shock, the acculturation process and professional athletes.

This literature review began with the basics of culture and its role in the acculturation process. Culture functions to create a predictable world for the individual within it (Becker, 1962). When a shift in culture occurs, one experiences unfamiliar new stimuli, such as differences in beliefs, values, behaviors and language, which begins the acculturation process. This unfamiliar environment can lead to a state of dis-ease (Barna, 1976), known as culture shock. Professional athletes experience changes in two different cultures when they travel overseas to live and compete. Their host culture and high performing culture changes. In order to better understand the athletes high performing culture, organizational culture was introduced to see how factors such as leadership and communication can affect the well-being of the group, and is used as an example of how a high performing culture could also operate. It showed the importance of a good group culture dynamic when it came to the comfort and performance of team members. Following this insight into the dynamics of organizational culture, past empirical research on the intercultural interactions of students, employees and athletes were highlighted to show how acculturation experiences affect other groups. In International students, the stress due to acculturation is highlighted. In employees working overseas, the importance of being open, being present and making relationships is emphasized to successfully transition into a new culture. In international athletes competing in North America, the affects of culture change on performance were introduced. Each of these empirical studies provided themes to look out for and compare to while exploring a new population experiencing an acculturation process.

As more athletes travel abroad for their career, exploring the unique acculturation experience and it's affect on perceived performance will help continue to fill a gap in literature and potentially help make the transition smoother for professional athletes. In order to explore and gain

in-depth information on this experience, the following section will outline how this study will answer **RQ1**: What is the acculturation experience of North American women playing professional volleyball living and competing overseas in a different host culture and high performing culture? , and **RQ2**: How does the ease or difficulty of acculturation affect the athlete's perceived level of athletic performance?

In order to answer this research questions most effectively, the following section will describe the methodology behind this study.

3. METHODOLOGY

Acculturation and cultural studies have traditionally been investigated utilizing qualitative methodology (Richards, 2014). This approach is most common because of the complexities of the individual and how they interact and live within cultures. Qualitative approaches yield in-depth information and reveal unique and powerful knowledge of cultural experience from athletes' (Ryba, 2017). As Ryba (2017) emphasized in her empirical summary of research regarding sports psychology regarding athletes, culture and other acculturation factors, the increase of international athletes traveling for a career in sport has created a need for knowledge in understanding the transitional process for these athletes for their "health, athletic and psychosocial development, and meaningful life" (Ryba, 2017, p.123). Based on past empirical evidence and opinion, this study will be conducted using qualitative methods as it will best answer the research questions and has shown to be more conclusive historically.

This study will use a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach aims to explore how humans experience a certain phenomena and is often conducted qualitatively through in-depth interviews using open ended questions in small sample sizes. Data collected is analyzed to try to identify themes or make generalizations about how a certain phenomenon is experienced or perceived (CIRT, 2019). It is an approach that emphasizes focus on people's subjective experiences and interpretations of the world (Trochim, W., 2002). This approach is used because the acculturation experience can be complex and in-depth. The goal of using this approach for this study is to allow participants to bring up experiences that stand out to them personally and see if themes emerge across multiple participants using semi-structured interviews. The reasoning behind using semi-structured, conversational interviews to collect data can be

summarized well in Brinkmann's (2018) explanation of semi-structured interviews, where he stated that the interviews provide data considered important by the interview participant with the guidance of the interviewer. The interviewee participant has the freedom to bring up what they believe to be salient in their experiences. Brinkmann included, "the interviewer has a greater say in focusing the conversation on issues that he or she deems important in relation to the research project" (p.579), which aids in keeping the discussion on the research questions, rather than having it go in another direction. An unstructured interview is not appropriate for this study because there are too many possible avenues for the discussion to take, where the focus may be taken off of the acculturation process. A structured interview would not allow the interview participant the ability to talk through their experience and have the salient data come up organically in conversation because they chose to bring it up, not because the interviewer asked about it. A qualitative approach to this study was conducted to collect valuable, descriptive data on the intercultural interactions and experiences of North American female professional athletes competing abroad.

The following section will describe the participants and explain how the researcher recruited them to participate in the study.

3.1 The Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study are women from North America who play professional indoor volleyball that have signed a job contract to compete overseas in a professional league. Due to the researchers experience playing high level volleyball in college, the ability to connect with current professional indoor volleyball players was conceivable. In order to find participants, a brief survey was created asking for gender, country of birth, whether they are a current profes-

sional athlete or were on within the last two years, what country they played professionally in and how many professional volleyball seasons they have played. After these basic questions, if the individual is a woman and is currently or has played professionally, the potential participant is asked whether they would be interested in participating in a research study and if yes, to input their email at the end of the survey. Following IRB approval, the survey was posted on the researcher's Facebook profile, with the goal that one of her connections would result in at least one participant. From that survey, four participants met criteria and indicated interest in participating. The participants that indicated interest and provided their personal email were sent a salutation email (see appendix A) with a consent form attached (see appendix B) that informed them of the study and the potential risks of participating. The participants were selected at first with purposeful sampling, as they must fit criteria determined by the research questions. After the survey no longer produced viable participants, snowball sampling was used to grow the number of participants as needed. Snowball sampling occurred organically due to the four initial participants sharing the information with their current and teammates who continued on to play professionally as well. Below is a table showing each participant and how they were sampled.

Sampling	Participants
Survey	Carly, Nikki, Autumn, Jazmine
Snowball	Brooke, Hailey, Alexis

Table 1: Participant Sampling

There are a total of seven participants in this study, all playing professional indoor volleyball overseas in European leagues. Of the seven participants, two are in their first official sea-

son, two are experiencing a second team after leaving their first team before completing a full season, one is in her second season and two have played for four or more years. Below is a table with all of the participant attributes.

	Autumn	Carly	Nikki	Brooke	Hailey	Jazmine	Alexis
State/ province, home country	Ontario, CANADA	Hawai'i, USA	Hawai'i, USA	Indiana, USA	Washington, DC	Ontario, CANADA	Michigan, USA
Current country of competition (current/ past)	Turkey	Germany	Finland Italy (incomplete season)	Spain Philippines (incomplete season)	Spain Austria	Hungary Finland (2) Switzerland	Germany (2) Romania Finland Philippines
# of pro seasons	1	1	1.5	1.5	2	4	5

Table 2: Participant Attributes *by Allyssah M. Fitterer*

Although all participants play in the European league, the sample population has a selection of athletes who have in different countries who also have varying years of experience in their career as a professional athlete. These small differences in experience allow exploration of how the years professional experience or the level of cultural differences affects participants. In order to gather quality data on the acculturation experiences of these athletes, the following section explains the instruments used in collecting quality data for this study.

3.2 Instruments

Considering the goal of this study is to explore a human experience that has little existing empirical evidence, this study is best solved phenomenologically with semi-structured, conversational interviews in order to focus on the athletes' unique subjective experiences and interpretations of their world. Interviews are relevant for R1 and R2 due to the complicated and unique nature of the athlete experience as well as a useful tool when exploring an uncharted empirical area. The reasoning behind using semi-structured, conversational interviews because the interviewee participant has the freedom to bring up what they believe to be salient in their experiences. Brinkmann (2018) included, "the interviewer has a greater say in focusing the conversation on issues that he or she deems important in relation to the research project" (p.579), which aids in keeping the discussion on the research questions, rather than having it go in another direction. An unstructured interview is not appropriate for this study because there are too many possible avenues for the discussion to take, where the focus may be taken off of the acculturation process. A structured interview would not allow the interview participant the ability to talk through their experience and have the salient data come up organically in conversation because they chose to bring it up, not because the interviewer asked about it. The athletes who agreed to participate in the study were interviewed for roughly thirty to forty-five minutes utilizing a video chatting app of their choice. Participants were also audio recorded to be transcribed for data analysis.

The interview questions are inspired by Yuefang Zhou, Divya Jindal-Snape, Keith Topping & John Todman's (2008) application of acculturation theory on international students, as

well an adapted acculturation model from Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001). Zhou et al.'s process is applied to international students—specifically Chinese students traveling to European and North American schools to study. These studies explored the culture shock and acculturation process by exploring students' experience in the host culture as well as the classroom environment. Like Zhou et al.'s analysis of both the classroom and host culture, this study's research questions analyze the acculturation process of professional athletes in the host culture as well as the high performing culture. This study used a similar approach in analyzing the athletes' experience in the host culture as well as the high performing culture using a phenomenological approach to gain the perspective of the athlete through semi-structured interviews. The second research question in this study on whether or not the acculturation process has an affect on perceived performance was inspired by Blount's (2012) quantitative study on international students competing in college athletics. Their specific survey question regarding the athlete's change in performance statistics due to cultural changes inspired including the analysis of the athletes' perceived performance and how it related to the ease or difficulty of the acculturation process.

The participants were asked interview questions that allowed them to bring up personal feelings and memories from their time overseas as well as questions that asked them to share any differences in the high performing culture that may affect how they perceive the quality of their performance. For example, one of the study's initial questions asked:

A) If this is not your first time living/competing overseas, what was your first season like? Please share your experience.

The question is general and allows for the participant to bring up the most stand out memories and feelings they experienced. Similar questions were asked on participants' experience within the new culture, new team environment as well as differences between their home country and current residence that they deemed significant. For example, participants were also asked,

B) How would you compare your performance professionally compared to your collegiate career? If you think it is different, what do you think affected or caused the change?

By offering a place for comparison between college and pro, participants were able to have space to bring up differences in environment, coaching, and level of play. This also allowed them to bring up feelings they believed might affect their playing, such as changes in confidence and outlook on the sport. Semi-structured questions allowed for participants to bring up any feelings and experiences that they thought significant regarding the acculturation process and their perception of their performance. An additional instrument in this study was the interviewer. Having played indoor volleyball at a high level, the interviewer's knowledge in the sport, it's high-performing environment and specific jargon allowed for participants to speak openly without worry over whether or not the interviewer will understand technical information or experiences. This knowledge also gave the interviewer an advantage when analyzing data because of existing volleyball-specific knowledge. The analysis of these interviews in search of significant results and conclusions are explained further in the following section.

3.3 Data Analysis

A qualitative approach to this study was conducted to collect valuable, descriptive data on the intercultural interactions and experiences of North American female professional athletes competing abroad. In order to separate information during analysis and illustrate what this study is exploring, figure 1 was created by the researcher,

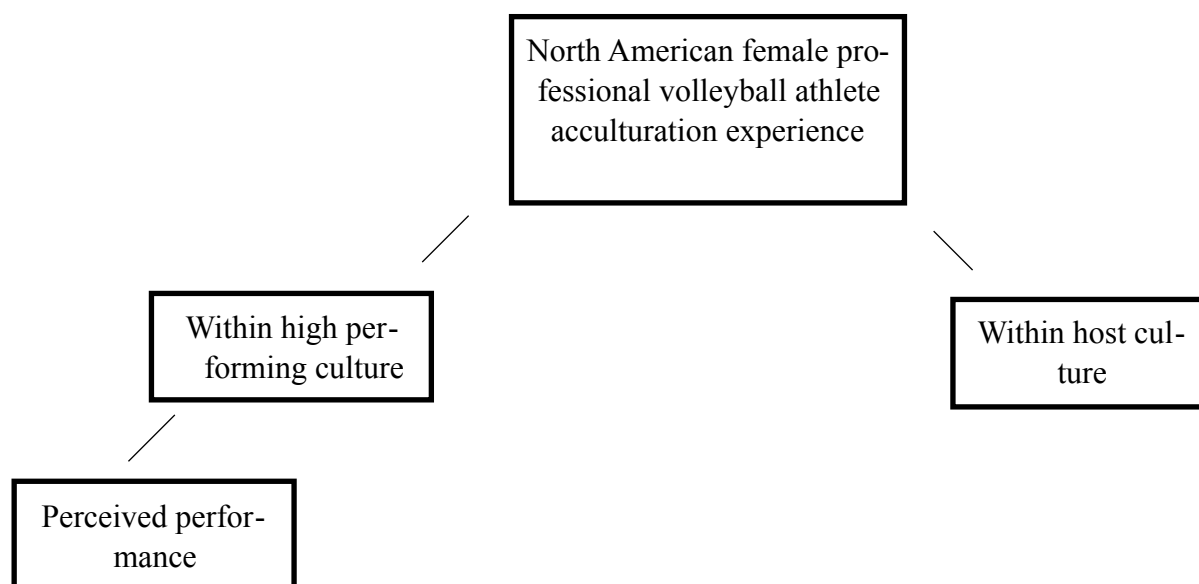


Figure 1: *Factors within athlete acculturation process by Allyssah M. Fitterer.*

Thematic analysis was used to identify major acculturation factors and perceived performance attitudes that became apparent in consistent repetition over multiple interviews. Interviews by participants were audio-recorded and transcribed. Following transcription, audio files were erased. Thematic analysis was conducted reading through transcriptions using qualitative coding. The codes that were used on there data were theming the data, attribute coding and emotion coding (Saldaña (2013)). Theming the data involves rereading transcripts and recording standout quotes and general similarities. Attribute coding involves recording demographic data,

or listing other data to easily categorize a participant with their interview. Emotion coding involves highlighting words that convey emotion or feeling (Saldaña (2013). This code was chosen to aid in locating feelings to see what event or situation they were attached to. For example, this code could identify feelings of "loneliness" and what situation led to that feeling. Every feeling connected with an event or situation creates an experience, whether positive or negative. The repetition of these experiences create themes in the overall acculturation experience and perceived performance of North American women playing indoor volleyball professionally at the international level.

The following section portrays the results of the seven interviews, highlighting the major themes found in the athletes' acculturation experience in the host culture, the high performing culture and their perceived performance within the high performing culture.

4. RESULTS

“I’ve had many experiences where it’s been absolute culture shock and I’ve panicked and almost cried.”

Autumn, **Turkey**

The qualitative interview process provided an in-depth perspective of the individual experiences of seven North American women playing indoor volleyball at the international professional level. The table below is a reminder of the participant attributes.

	Autumn	Carly	Nikki	Brooke	Hailey	Jazmine	Alexis
State/ province, home country	Ontario, CANADA	Hawai’i, USA	Hawai’i, USA	Indiana, USA	Washington , DC	Ontario, CANADA	Michigan, USA
Current country of competitio n (current/ past)	Turkey	Germany	Finland Italy (incomplete season)	Spain Philippines (incomplete season)	Spain Austria	Hungary Finland(2) Switzerland	Germany (2) Romania Finland Philippines
# of pro seasons	1	1	1.5	1.5	2	4	5

Table 2: Participant Attributes *by Allyssah M. Fitterer*

The participant attributes indicate that all seven compete in the 2018/2019 European professional league. Two of seven have competed outside of European countries in the past, both in the Philippines. It is also important to highlight that participants are from

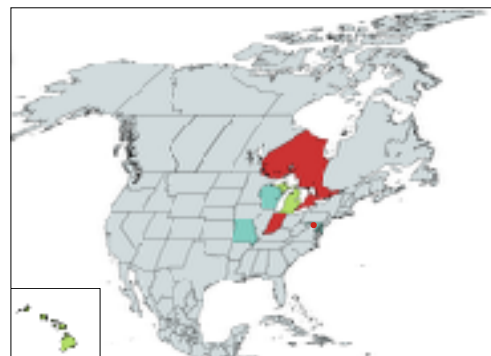


Figure 2: Map representing home state/province of participants (red), states where participants played collegiately (blue), and states that were participant home states and states where participants played collegiately (green) *by Allyssah M. Fitterer*

two main areas; shown in Figure 2. The lack of diversity in selection may be reason for similarities in opinion or responses within interviews.

The results section covers the major themes across all seven interviews for both RQ1 and RQ2. This section first covers RQ1 by further dissecting the themes in the acculturation process of, first, the host culture and, second, the high performing culture. RQ1 is divided into two sub-sections—the acculturation experience within the host culture and the acculturation experience within the high performing culture—for an understanding of the entire experience. Experience within the host-culture showed **two major themes**, the first being **out of place** and the second being **relationships**. Experience within the high performing culture showed **two major themes**. These two themes were **expectations** and **foreigners versus locals**.

RQ2 asks how the acculturation process affects the athlete's perceived performance. The minor theme of *initial adjustment* stood out at the beginning of the athletes transitions. The feeling of anxiety and nervousness while integrating into a new team atmosphere affected some participants initially. The initial adjustment caused performance difficulty at the beginning of athletes seasons due to subtle nuances in practice environments when compared to their north American experience, especially for those competing in their first professional season. Participants commented that their quality of play was not necessarily better or worse, just different.

In order to gain understanding on the acculturation experience of professional volleyball athletes overseas, this study's first research question asked:

RQ1: What is the acculturation experience of North American women playing professional volleyball living and competing overseas in a different host culture and high performing culture?

To answer this question, participants were asked a series of interview questions about their experiences adjusting to their new home and new competitive environment. For example, athletes were asked the differences between their collegiate and pro experience as well as asked about any stand out experiences while interacting with the host culture. After using thematic analysis, major themes stood out in both the acculturation experience in the host culture as well as the high performing culture. Within the host culture there were two major themes including *out of place* and *relationships*.

The first theme *out of place* demonstrates the differences in host and home culture. The essence of this theme describes how the athletes respond to being in a new culture. Value is placed on familiarity and making sense of things. Participants expressed appreciation for external help in acclimating and similarities between their home and new host culture. This theme showcases feelings of discomfort, confusion and awkwardness.

The second theme *relationships* describes the impact of quality relationships on the athlete. The essence of this theme relates to how athletes experience being far from their home culture with few meaningful relationships in their host culture. Value is placed on contact with existing friendships and family members, whether it be in person or through a device. Athletes appreciate shared language. This theme showcases feelings of homesickness, loneliness and gratefulness. The following sections explain the host culture's acculturation process' two major themes in depth.

4.1 Acculturation within host culture

Theme One: Out of place

Key feelings: Discomfort, Confusion

“It really makes you feel like you’re a young child again and everything around you is so unfamiliar... You have to go back to the basic things that you know, and just get used to being uncomfortable all of the time and feeling out of place.”

— Nikki, **Finland**

The first theme *out of place* demonstrates the differences in host and home culture. The essence of this theme describes how the athletes respond to unfamiliar situations in a new culture. Value is placed on familiarity and making sense of things.. This theme showcases feelings of discomfort, confusion and awkwardness.

Throughout each interview, participants emphasized the noticeable adjustment they had to make when first arriving to their new host culture. Feeling out of place was consistent throughout participant interviews, whether it was due to language barriers, orientating oneself geographically, difference in housing and everyday tasks or ethnicity. This sense of being out of place led to feelings of discomfort and confusion. Each athlete craved familiarity in communication, food, behaviors and more. Participants shared experiences with large and small cultural differences that caused initial confusion. Autumn in Turkey added significance to this theme by sharing:

In the summer we actually came to Turkey and they told us we were going out in Istanbul so it was a summer day so I put on my jean shorts and a t-shirt and they were like “you can’t wear jean shorts, we’re in Turkey.” It’s traditional and religious. Even if people aren’t religious, it’s just a religious country... you can’t just wear your jean shorts, people will look at you so weird. So I felt uncomfortable with that.

Other participants interviewed felt being out of place went beyond what they wore and related more to their physical appearance, which they could not change. Two participants shared that their height captured attention. Multiple participants also indicated that their ethnicity made them feel out of place in areas where they were the minority. While playing in the Philippines, Brooke reflected her appearance—height, blond hair and pale complexion—made her stand out. Carly adds more to this theme:

A lot of people stare. I don’t know if it’s because I’m American or it’s because I’m Asian (laughs) but, constantly. You just walk around and people are looking at you and that’s something, as an American, you’re like “why are you staring, that’s rude” but I think they’re just curious.

Moving away from uncontrollable factors, participants also expressed confusion when interacting with people of the host culture. Behavioral cues, specifically, caused hesitation. Jazmine, who has played four professional seasons shares the subtle changes in greeting etiquette:

Different countries will start on different sides, and some countries do one kiss, some do three, some do two, so you're kind of just trying to play along and go along with it but it can get a little awkward sometimes for sure.

While body language caused some awkward encounters, spoken language was also a significant factor in feeling out of place. Majority of participants indicated that shared language made adjusting easier, whether it was English or the host culture's language. Two participants out of seven revealed their efforts in speaking the local language. Alexis shares her experience:

We have German lessons and I'll try to go to a store and order something my slow—and sometimes wrong—German and they respond in native speed and it's just like “Ahh, sorry. English. You know?” (laughs) You're feeling like a fraud and everything.

The inability to communicate made participants feel out of place. When communication took less effort—or was shared—participants gravitated towards it. Carly explains:

Yeah, being away from American culture is definitely different. It's just the language, I mean, you can't understand what anyone's saying. Some older people don't really speak any english so when they try to talk to you, you're just like ‘I don't know, I'm sorry, I'm sorry I don't speak German’. So, being like in their culture isn't so horrible, it's just like you miss certain things like food and eavesdropping on someone - like, not on purpose just like knowing you can understand someone's conversation.

This thought of comfort in shared language was brought up several times by participants, explaining that hearing someone in public speak English was exciting because it was rare. Ma-

majority of participants indicated that hearing their native language, which is English for all, was comforting. Few participants lived in areas where English could be heard day to day in public. The theme out of place showed that there are multiple factors that make participants feel out of place when placed in a new culture. Being unable to mirror the host culture's general appearance, body language, or spoken language created challenges in participant's ability to communicate effectively. Being unable to successfully operate in a space led to feelings of confusion and discomfort and made participants feel like the other. Majority of respondents indicated feeling out of place within the host culture at least once within their acculturation process. Nikki pointed out an interesting observation when she said, "I can't tell if it's gotten better or if I've gotten better at being uncomfortable." The longer participants were in the host country, the more they adapted to the socio-cultural norms and the easier it became to operate in the new environment. Navigating transportation, grocery stores, household appliances that were once confusing became basic knowledge for majority of participants and they developed routines. The initial feelings of discomfort and confusion faded as participants learned how to respond to the host culture. Feeling out of place was related to how comfortable quickly they learned how to operate within their new home.

The first theme *out of place* described how the majority of athletes experienced the feelings of discomfort, confusion and awkwardness when interacting with the host culture. Majority of the out of place theme derived from a mixture of behavior, appearance and communication differences between cultures. Athletes described their experiences interacting with the host culture as challenging, but eases over time. The challenges ease in relation to how quickly participants learn how to operate within the host culture. Participants who became more involved with

people within the host culture tended to feel less out of place because they either learned the appropriate cultural responses or because they created a place with other teammates where they felt as though they belonged. Other participants learned the minimum requirements to operate in the host culture for the length of a season while limiting the interaction with the host culture, perhaps to feel less out of place.

The second theme *relationships* describes the impact of relationships on the athlete. The essence of this theme relates to how athletes interact with their support system from home and with relationships in the host culture. Value is placed on contact with existing friendships and family members, whether it be in person or through a device. Athletes appreciate shared language, and will gravitate towards it. This theme showcases feelings of homesickness, loneliness and gratefulness. This theme captures the impact relationships have on the athletes' well-being.

Theme Two: Relationships

Key feelings: Homesick, Lonely, Grateful

“It is all-consuming and it sucks because you see everybody at home continuing on with their lives. I mean, they’re missing you but they have each other still and they have their environment, their friends and their family and then you’re just this person across the world missing like twenty people... It’s so hard cause - I think it hurts - for sure it hurts [my boyfriend], for me to leave him... I’m his girlfriend but he’s also still surrounded by family and friends. So, it’s hard out here when you’re just alone.”

— Autumn, **Turkey**

Descriptive experiences emerged as participants opened up about relationships in their lives. The essence of this theme relates to how athletes experience the acculturation process with or without quality relationships in their host culture. Value is placed on the ability to communicate as well as contact with existing friendships and family members, whether it be in person or through a device. The absence of relationships created feelings of homesickness and loneliness, while the presence of relationships created the feeling of gratefulness. The two main types of relationships athletes discussed were the support systems from home and relationships within the host culture.

A) Support System

Participants all spoke of their support system—family, friends and significant others from their home culture. Athletes maintained contact by using technology such as video chatting software and phone calls, while some also had family travel to their country of competition up to five times in a single eight-month season. First, participant experiences with their support system are shared then differences in types support are reviewed.

The majority of participants brought up their support system and how much they missed them and their unique relationships. Alexis, in Germany, described this:

I'll go and interact with other people, but I mean it's not the same as going and messing with my dad or something like that, you know? ... Especially with people you don't necessarily share that same closeness with. Yeah, so I just kind of just distract myself from it.

Jazmine, in Hungary, shared an optimistic view of homesickness:

This year I didn't get to go home for Christmas, so that was really hard. And it's interesting celebrating it in a different way, in a different country but I wouldn't want to do it again. I would rather be at home with my family celebrating Christmas.

Autumn, in her first season in Turkey, expresses homesickness the most out of all participants. She shares her inner struggle of wanting to follow her dreams while missing her family and the role of technology:

For me it's like I'm here, but a part of me is always at home or wanting to be at home, you know? It's like I just love you all so much I just want to be there too. Like I'm here because I should be and I need to be for my goals but I can't just cut these ties and pretend I don't miss you... I've probably FaceTime's my little sister like ten hours in the past week combined, just like talking to her and just having her there. To know she's there comforts me. Even though it's really tough through FaceTime but, I don't know, you don't understand how important they are till—oh, this is making me emotional—how important they are till you get into a situation where you desperately need them to be there for you, and then they are. (Crying) It's nice.

These initial feelings of homesickness aimed to be relieved by using technology such as video chatting software or phone calls. Jazmine explains her appreciation for technology:

Technology has helped so much because, I mean, we can talk but it's not the same as being home with family, but being able to see them and hear their voices is so much easier. I was talking with some of my teammates, I couldn't imagine what it was like to have only

phone calls. Or even before phones, to have to write letters to you family or something. It would be really tough. There are some days where you just need your mom, you know? Or to talk to your friends and it gets pretty lonely and I think it's huge. Like I couldn't imagine life without video chat really.

Despite the majority of participants keeping in touch with their support system frequently, it was evident that participants felt that digital contact was not the same as seeing them in person. Support system connections that did have an impact were those where family could visit in person, where participants expressed frequent feelings of gratitude. Only two participants mentioned support system visits, but others indicated that frequent visits would have helped them. Brooke, who reported being homesick less frequently, mentioned:

It was very nice to have them come. My sister definitely used it more as a free place to stay while she took a tour of Madrid (laughs) but we hung out a lot so it was nice to get that taste of home.

Nikki, in Finland, has had multiple family members visit every couple months while living overseas and shares her experience:

Everyone loves having family around them, but also it gives me something to look forward to and that really helps the days go by faster. If I know my dad's coming the 15th of February, it makes February go by so much faster cause I'm just waiting to get to the 15th... So yeah, having such a great support system like that, who can come out and visit me, it helps my morale. It helps my morale because I have my family around and it helps because it makes it feel like it's going faster, even if it might not be. Yeah, I'm pretty lucky.

In Nikki's situation, she had family visit every few months, so she operated everyday knowing she would see someone she cared about in a month, rather than other participants who would only see their family and friends if they were given a break during holidays or at the end of their nine month contract. It gave her a sense ease knowing someone she was close with was coming soon.

Autumn, in her first season in Turkey, shared her struggles with waiting long periods of time without seeing her family or friends:

I mean you just try to push yourself - and it's not totally unenjoyable, the whole experience, but when you have bad times it's really hard cause you don't have anyone that you're that comfortable with. So yeah, you're just like "Okay, I have three months left" and you're trying to be optimistic but then it's like, (emphasizes) three months. That's a long time when you think about missing people. It really is hard.

Those who were consistently thinking about when they would see their family and friends next had trouble being fully immersed in the host culture. For those who did not have close relationships within the host culture, they spent their time counting down days until the next visit or when they would be able to return home. This separation from family, friends and significant others resulted in participants feeling lonely but also grateful when their absence reminded participants of how much their support system meant to them. Autumn explains this loneliness and gratitude while also introducing an interesting idea:

For me, the hardest part is being home alone for five hours and just sitting here missing everybody from home, so much. There's nothing you can do about that, you're going to miss people. So, sometimes I think like, 'Oh if I just didn't have these close connec-

tions—and you were just kind of like distant—that I would just really fall into life here and just be where your feet are, which I would love to be... I think it would make it a little bit easier to do that but also when you go through the hard times and there's inevitably going to be hard times over a year, it's so lucky to have them. So, I think, yeah, maybe there's some people who don't have it and maybe it's a little bit easier and they can just really engulf themselves in the environment their in.

An important aspect to Autumn's experience is that she lacked close relationships within the host culture she lived in, which explains the strength and frequency of her homesickness and loneliness. Relationships or lack of relationships within the host culture were related to the number of people who the athletes were able to communicate. In Autumn's experience, she only had two others speak fluent English. Participants relationships within host cultures varied depending on ease of communication. The second focus in the theme of relationships is the connections made with teammates and others in the host community.

B) Teammates/Host Community

The ability to communicate affected who participants could connect with while playing overseas. Autumn was the only participant who had as little as two teammates that could speak English, while the rest of the participants were able to converse with more. Participants share a mixture of experiences with the host culture, most predominantly being with their teammates. Majority of participants described positive initial interactions with teammates who helped them settle in to the new host culture. Majority of participants indicated that teammates from the host

culture helped athletes adjust for the beginning of their stay, but few remained helpful or close enough to cultivate a friendship. For Hailey, it varied from team to team:

In Austria the girls were really inviting and really sweet, and when I came there was already a girl who had already been there, so she took us to the grocery store and stuff—we all shared a car. And so she was home during the day with us and we had the same schedule. Here [Spain] it's been a little bit different because the girls either go to school or work during the day, so we don't really see them. So we had to figure out a lot more things for ourselves, and we don't have a car here either so we figured out how to take the bus, take the metro—figured it out on our own. A lot more independent here than I was in Austria.

Hailey's experience in two different places showed how the interactions with teammates are not always the same from place to place or team to team. Nikki shared a similar experience:

My experience in Italy was really bad. I lived by myself and I was extremely homesick and all of the coaches didn't speak a word of English, so that was very difficult for me. Coming here, I was very nervous, but it was so different. Everyone was so encouraging and so kind and wanted to make sure I was okay and was just very welcoming. So it allowed me to settle in and become more comfortable quicker. That kind of helped me a lot. I feel if I didn't have such a welcoming group of coaching and staff and teammates, that I probably would have had a lot harder of a time getting adjusted to everything here.

Carly, in her first season, had teammates that initially started as helpful and polite and transformed into a friendly tradition over time. She shared:

My teammate, she's a German and lives in my building too and they made dinner for us on the first night and that was super cool of them, cause we were like "We don't know what we're doing, we just got here" and I was super jet-lagged but they made dinner and now we do this thing, ever since then, that because they made that one dinner, then we made them a meal. And now we just alternate, it's cool. Both Americans and Germans and foreigners have been very helpful. I think we all just want friendship. Even the Germans, some of them are not in their home town so they're kind of in a new place too. It's still Germany, but yeah.

Across most interviews, participants indicated that having local teammates help them their first few days made the acculturation process less challenging, but some expressed the they wished it had lasted past their first couple days within the host culture. Autumn explains:

They try their best to try to help you get comfortable but then when they think you're comfortable, they kind of let you go and you're still a little bit uncomfortable but you just got to learn to deal with some stuff on your own.

For most, the ability to communicate was very important in making new connections.

Carly explained:

It was me and then my friend and then another American that we met and she is really awesome. Yeah, you kind of hang out with - we have our own group and we kind of hang out with mostly Americans because we all talk in English and we found other people. Like we actually found these guys who live in a town about half an hour away and one's Canadian and one is from England. We sometimes get to together, and you know, it's in English. It's nice to talk and have people you can relate to. And they know where

you're coming from - from just like a cultural standpoint cause even that sometimes gets blurred.

The ability to converse doesn't create close relationships itself. Alexis, who could converse with teammates, had little in common with them which resulted in her bring alone majority of the time. Alexis shared:

I think sometimes it's just more personality differences... it's normal little team drama, you know, everybody has their little people they hang onto and stuff like that. And me, I usually like to go and do my own thing. I'm not the most chatty person and... That doesn't necessarily mesh well with everybody all the time. But, I mean, at the end of the day, I'm here to do my job... I'm going to do my job, anything outside of that I don't really need to focus on. You know?

A few participants, however, didn't need to make new connections. Carly, Nikki and Jazmine had pre-existing relationships on their professional indoor volleyball teams. These three participants experience less homesickness and it could be in relation to knowing someone on the team.

my friend and roommate, Emily, she's the one that got me here. She played here last year, so way before I even got to Germany, she was telling me what I needed, what it's like and just general things that she remembered and that was helpful to prepare yourself for what was to come. Germany itself is not so different from the United States. It looks different but in the end, the people speak a different language but it's not like a crazy culture shock. Yeah, they got here before me and we just kinda hung out and that was all that - we bonded and that was nice.

Similarly, Hailey ran into someone she new from home, and was the only participant who cultivated a relationship outside of the professional volleyball realm. Hailey explained:

The relationships with teammates and the host community differed. Some found friendship in teammates who shared language, some had other foreigners they could relate to, some made connections within the community, and others were fortunate to have pre-existing friendships on their professional team. Across all interviews, participants stressed the importance of relationships. The theme *relationships* describes the impact of relationships on the athlete. The essence of this theme relates to how athletes interact with their support system from home and with relationships in the host culture. Value was placed on contact with existing friendships and family members, whether it be in person or through a device and although gratitude was expressed for technology's ability to help athlete's through homesickness, those who had family or friends that could visit showed less frequent feelings of homesickness and loneliness. Athletes appreciated shared language, and gravitated towards it on their team and within the community. This theme showcases feelings of homesickness, loneliness and gratefulness. This theme captures the impact relationships have on the athletes' well-being.

This study explores the host culture, where athletes initially felt out of place and relied on relationships to alleviate feelings of homesickness and loneliness. Majority of athletes used technology to maintain contact with their support system—their family, friends and significant others from home. Although it alleviated feelings of homesickness and loneliness temporarily, having in-person connections alleviated these feelings for longer periods of time. These in person connections included professional teammates, others within the host culture who spoke English and

in-person visits from athletes' family and friends. These findings only represent one aspect the athlete must adjust to. The professional athlete competing overseas must adjust to two different cultures; the host culture and the high performing culture. In order for the exploration of the acculturation experience of these seven women to be thorough, this study must analyze the acculturation experience the athletes' experiences within the host culture, but also analyze their experiences within the high-performing culture. The next section will highlight the two major themes evident in participants' acculturation experiences within the high-performing culture, which are *expectations* and *foreigners vs. locals*.

4.2 Acculturation within high performing culture

"The practice environment was definitely something I was nervous to get into because it's always hard when you go to a new place and you're like, "Oh, well how do they run their practices" or "Is it intense? Is it easy? Do they talk a lot? Is it relatively quiet?" So as an athlete, going into a new practice environment is something that is kind of uncomfortable."

— Nikki, **Finland**

The acculturation process of seven women who play professional indoor volleyball internationally can be understood in two segments. The first, acculturation process within host culture, was previously covered. In order to fully understand the athlete experience, the high performing culture was also analyzed. Experience within the high performing culture showed **two major themes**. These two themes were **expectations** and **foreigners versus locals**.

The first theme **expectations** highlights the standards of performance the professional

team's coach and managers have for the seven professional athletes interviewed. The essence of this theme describes how athletes react to these expectations. Athletes compare the expectations of their collegiate career and their professional career. The feelings within this section are nervousness, focus and indifference. The second theme **foreigners versus locals** demonstrates the division of athletes that occurs on each participants professional team. The foreigners consist of any team members not from the host country and the locals are team members from the host country. The essence of this theme exemplifies how athletes experience their teammates in the professional high performing culture. Participants value shared communication and helpful teammates. The third overall theme, expectations, is covered next.

Theme Three: Expectations

Key feelings: Nervous, indifferent, focused

The first theme **expectations** highlights the standards of performance the professional team's coach and managers have for the seven professional athletes interviewed. These standards varied from league to league as the level of volleyball changed. Participants responded differently to expectations depending on the level of the league they are competing in as well as the differences in personalities. Athletes responded to expectations with nervousness, increased focus or indifference. The majority of athletes highlighted the difference of expectations between their collegiate indoor volleyball career in the United States and their professional international indoor volleyball career. This comparison emphasized the expectations a professional athlete faces when performing on professional team. Jazmine, in Hungary, described this:

In college, I felt that people cared about you and they wanted you to develop and it was like a family. Whereas when you're playing professionally, it's really a job. So if you're not performing, then you need to find a way to perform or you could get fired. They're paying you to do this so they're expecting you to perform.

The majority of participants shared this change in perspective. Volleyball was a career now and the athletes were paid for their performance. Comparing the two, Nikki, in Finland shares:

The different thing about pro as well is that - if you have a bad game in college, you have a bad game. It's okay, you have next game. If you have a very bad game in pro, you could lose your job. They could send you home... It's all on you. But for college, there's less stakes, if that makes sense. For pro, it's truly your job and if you don't do well, you get fired.

The change in consequence for not performing emphasized the standards that were expected of athletes, whether the standards were more or less attainable than college. When faced with expectations and the potential consequences of not meeting them, athletes responded in three ways. They reacted nervously, remained indifferent or became focused. Nikki responded to the expectation nervously, explaining her inner dialogue during a game at the beginning of her acculturation process. "Okay, if I make a mistake, they're going to think that I'm not good enough to keep and then they're going to send me home... My job depends on how many kills I get in this set." In one participants' case, her and her team were threatened by owners when the

team was not performing to the standard that was expected. Although initially worried, Autumn reflects:

...later on this season we lost six games in a row and the president called a meeting and told us he was going to take 25% of our salary. So that was obviously stress-inducing and caused a lot of panic... So it's almost like constant anxiety about, if you have a bad game or like "What's going to happen to you?" "What are they thinking?" "What are they talking about?". Especially because they're not speaking your language... You have to accept it. Otherwise you just live with this constant anxiety.

Some athletes responded to the different expectations with indifference. This often occurred when the athlete was faced with lower expectations from coaches in professional volleyball when compared to the higher expectations of their college team. Hailey and Alexis shared this, commenting on the importance of the level of leagues and how lower level leagues are not as intense. Alexis shared the differences between the college experience and professional experience and how she perceived the level of the league she was in:

Well depending on where you go, the places I've been it hasn't quite been as intense as it was in college, as far as training and like—yeah as far as like training and stuff goes... It's not quite as (pause) yeah, as intense. I can't think of a better word. I mean it's more or less the same except for like we don't have class in the middle. We just practice in the morning and in the evening and then the rest of the time I just have to fill it with something.

This lower level league lowered the expectations of what athletes were used to. Some athletes, responded to higher expectations with more focus. Brooke shared the differences between the college experience and professional experience and how she responded after being terminated in her first season:

Now, especially in the Philippines, I got fired there. So now I know that if you don't perform, there is a more drastic consequence. They can just get rid of you. So now it's more of a "Okay, I have to go out there and try my hardest and improve every day... Surprisingly, to me, it's not more stressful. Like you would think it would be more stressful, but for me it's more of a challenge and so I'm pushing myself a little bit more." Whereas in college it was more of a "meh, what are you going to do, take me out? Okay, fine. Which, I mean, I obviously did not like it, but it wasn't like they're going to pull my scholarship.

Additionally, other expectations that were important in college no longer mattered in a couple participant experiences. For example, the expectation that the athlete remain attentive to the coach. An interesting experience that two participants brought up were the communication barriers with coaches who didn't speak much English in the high performing culture. Majority of the time, participants would only be spoken to in broken English when they weren't meeting expectations on the court. For example, Brooke offered

I speak a decent amount of Spanish and get what he's saying in practice. He doesn't use English a lot, especially like during practice. But if there's something important that he

wants to make sure we understand he'll say it in English. Especially the scouting stuff, like he'll say "You need to be here" to make sure we know.

Similarly, Autumn shared her experience with Turkish:

I don't listen. I just sit there. I have a picture of me sitting in a timeout staring into the crowd while he's talking in Turkish. Usually I would think like, "That's so terrible, I have to be engaged" but I can't understand a single thing he's saying, so I'm just not going to sit there and stare at him like I pretend to know that he's saying. So I just look around and try to imagine something about the game, I don't know... I know he's talking to a certain player or if he's doing some sort of motioning—trying to figure out what he's talking about but then, every word here kind of sounds pretty similar so I just give up and start focusing on what I need to do on the court.

For the participants who had the communication barrier between themselves and their coach, it caused them to focus more on their individual performance and rely on body language for communication. An interesting experience that was shared by Carly in Germany was the expectations regarding her contract. Although the only participant to bring up this experience, it stood out. Carly brought up the expectations within the athlete's contract and how it differed from college expectations regarding interaction with the media and public. She shared:

One of our posters was like five of my teammates and they had the tall teammates—but they had to have small feet cause it was for this (pause) department store brand. They had to dress up in super short dresses and heels and their makeup was done and the cap-

tion was “Erfurt’s Longest Legs”. And we’re a volleyball team, you know, like in the States that would not fly, at all. And here, some teams do swim suit calendars, and lingerie shoots. And it’s like, if it’s in your contract, you gotta do it. Like if it’s PR then you gotta do it.

Carly’s experience brought a new expectation that other participants had not mentioned. The expectation that the professional athletes must adhere to the terms of their contract. Aside from this, the changes in the level of the league, intercultural communication barriers and personality affected how participants responded to expectations. Participants responded in one of three ways, depending on these factors. Athletes responded to expectations with nervousness, increased focus or indifference. The majority of athletes highlighted the difference of expectations between their collegiate indoor volleyball career in the United States and their professional international indoor volleyball career. This comparison emphasized the expectations a professional athlete faces when performing on a professional team, whether or not they were higher or lower than their college experience. Aside from expectation of their performance, athletes also had to adjust to changes in teammates. Opposed to college, where the majority of teams are made up of other North Americans, the participants shared the diversity of professional teams and how relationships within the high-performing culture formed. The fourth theme *foreigners vs locals* explains the consistent divide seen within teammates across the majority of participants experiences’ while playing professionally in international leagues. The theme *foreigners vs locals* is showcased in the following section.

Theme Four: Foreigners vs Locals

The fourth theme **foreigners versus locals** demonstrates the division of athletes that occurs on each participants professional team. The foreigners consist of any team members not from the host country and the locals are team members from the host country. These divisions occur mainly due to the ease of communication, which—similar to the host culture experience—the participants gravitate towards but also due to living arrangements and length of time competing on the same professional team. The essence of this theme exemplifies how athletes experience their teammates in the professional high performing culture. Participants value shared communication and helpful teammates. The interactions between foreigners and locals differed between participants, but the theme of division was prevalent throughout the majority. Brooke shared:

We didn't really interact with them outside of practice. They were helpful in practice but other than that, we didn't really see them as much cause they lived around the city.

The divide was influenced by the temporary nature of professional athletic contracts. Of the participants who played more than two years, they only stayed in one country at most two years before changing leagues. That being said, there is a chance that the year the athletes' remained in the same country, they could have moved to a different team. The temporary nature of foreigners on teams may contribute to this divide, because if they are only there for a single season and the locals have been their for multiple, relationships potentially could be hard to cultivate. Autumn explained the divide as well as the fact that the locals have known each other for longer:

I guess the people who are from - who are locals on the team, the non-international players, they kind of stick together. And the foreigners stick together. You can definitely become friends with them, but they just know each other from before, they kind of have this tight-knit group, so yeah, I only really have one close friend on the team.

The differences in language as well as place of living contributed significantly to the division. Nikki shared how although the locals helped her within the host culture, but not the high performing culture:

They really helped me, they were like “this is how most practices normally go, we usually have so and so many water breaks, we get a lot of time to stretch” so they kind of laid out the practice for me before I even went to practice. So that really eased my heart.

Then, a lot of the girls that are Finnish on the team speak really, really good English and so they’ve kind of helped me with learning how to say Finnish words and how to say things in Finnish. They’ll take us out, if we have a weekend off, they’ll take us out into town and we all go out and do things so the – Practice-wise, that was the American girls I live with, but the environment of how to be here in Finland, that was a lot of the Finnish girls on the team.

Other participants did not have the same interaction with locals. Autumn, in Turkey, was on her own when it came to interacting with locals in the high-performing culture. She explains the dynamic being unable to communicate with her teammates, while she’s the only foreigner on the court:

They tell you in college, “you don’t have to be friends to play well together, you just have to be teammates” and we all thought “you have to be friends” or at least you have to get along, and it’s really not the case. You don’t have to get along at all. You have to respect one another but besides that I’m not even able to communicate with our setter and she’s giving me the ball. I can hardly communicate with her. So, really you just have to learn how to work together. That was also an adjustment and interesting for me to learn because sometimes you stand on the court and have no clue what’s going on.

Participants had different experiences with teammates in the high performing culture.

Experience within the high performing culture showed **two major themes**. These two themes were **expectations** and **foreigners versus locals**. The first theme **expectations** highlighted the standards of performance the professional team’s coach and managers have for the seven professional athletes interviewed. This theme described how athletes reacted to these expectations. Athletes compared the expectations of their collegiate career and their professional career. The feelings within this section are nervousness, focus and indifference. The second theme **foreigners versus locals** demonstrates the division of athletes that occurs on each participants professional team. Within the high performing culture, some teammates were helpful, others rarely interacted, but the division between local athletes and foreigners playing their first season with that team was evident in participant interviews. Living arrangements, language and length of time competing with the same team.

RQ1 was asked to explore the acculturation experience in both the host and high performing culture of the professional athlete competing overseas. In order to see the impact of the ac-

culturation process on the athletes performance, RQ2 asks how the acculturation process affects the athletes' perceived performance.

4.3 Perceived Performance

One could imagine that across all the changes one could experience traveling overseas, that they could count on their occupation to remain the most consistent or most similar from their home country. After all, the court has the same dimensions and the same rules. Some participants struggled and others thrived, but there was not a strong relationship between the athletes' perceived performances and the ease or difficulty of their acculturation experience. For example, one participant excelled on the court despite not having close relationships in the host culture, without understanding majority of her teammates and coaches and expressing feelings of homesickness, loneliness and culture shock most frequently out of all participants. She had been named top five of her position in the entire league, among Olympic athletes. Many factors, including the position they played and level of international volleyball league impacted how one rated or looked at individual athletes perceived their performance. One theme that did stand out in a few participants were the feelings experienced at the very beginning of their transition. The theme, *initial adjustment*. The feeling of anxiety and nervousness while integrating into a new team atmosphere—covered in the high performing culture section—affected some participants initially. The initial adjustment caused performance difficulty at the beginning of athletes seasons due to subtle nuances in practice environments when compared to their north American experience, especially for those competing in their first professional season. Participants commented that their quality of play was not necessarily better or worse, just different.

Theme Five: Initial adjustment

The feeling of anxiety and nervousness while integrating into a new team atmosphere—covered in the high performing culture section—affected some participants’ perceived performance initially. Carly explains her initial struggle due to a change of play, position and ball,

Yeah, college was so much easier for me. I don’t know what it was, I just got in as a freshman and was just like “alright, we’re gunna play” (laughs). I don’t know, I went from a leadership position to kind of like the bottom of the barrel. But not just because—first of all, it’s so much faster. We have a new ball. The ball really messed me up with passing and defense cause I’m playing a position I’ve never played before. It was kind of a lot all at once. In the beginning it was really hard because I was used to being solid and consistent, and in the beginning and even now it’s like a roller coaster....I think that’s part of the learning process, of like your first pro season. And I’m playing something that I’ve never done before, which also is not easy. I think - I mean, like gosh. It’s been like five and a half months and I think I’m finally kinda getting the hang of it.

Carly was not the only one who had to get used to subtle differences. A few participants had to adjust to the differences in coaching styles. Autumn, in Turkey, who was used to being a consistent player on her national team experienced challenges in the beginning of her professional international season. She explained:

When I first got here—okay well, this summer [on the national team] our Italian coach was letting me pass like half the court and telling people not to take the ball off me and I

felt really confident passing... So he [Turkey coach] was really trying to work with me but was really changing my technique to like, lunging at balls instead of getting my feet there which is really not like the North American way to pass. So, I mean, I was at a loss. At least if I was doing well with my own technique, I could have just resorted back to it, but I didn't. I was doing horrible with it, so I had to try to adjust. So I started lunging at balls and that was going really bad and it was all terrible. So I really struggled for a while and it's kind of turning the corner now and I'm doing a little bit better but I thought that technique was super strange.

Other participants explained that their performance improved as they adjusted to the ball, style of play and coaching and level of the league. Participants explained that they feel as though they play the same as they did in college. One participant reflected that she felt as though her quality of play had decreased, not due to the ease of her transition into her new environment, but because of the quality of play around her.

I think I still have the same mentality as far as going out there and doing my best and give 100% effort on everything, every time... As far as actual skill-playing, I don't think I'm quite as good as I was in college and I think that's partly because—like I said before—the main focus is on playing not technical work. Skill work helps me a lot and being in places that you don't really have the opportunity to work on that a lot is kind of, hindered me a little bit... and you know, sometimes—where the level is—you don't necessarily have to work as hard to be as good, if that makes sense. That's affected me a little

bit... It's me trying to bring up everyone else's level... and you try to bring up your own but their level is bringing me down. There's only so much you can do at a certain level.

Based on the data, there is little evidence that the ease of an athlete's overall acculturation affected their perceived performance. Subtle themes such as initial adjustment surfaced a few times within the data, but athletes explained their performance not as better or worse in most cases, just different. The examples above show the examples of some difficulties some athletes had adjusting to some high-performing culture environmental factors, such as coaching styles, change of equipment and level of play. Other athletes recorded little to no impact on their performance, and suggested it had more to do with the level of the league rather than their actual performance. Hailey explained this:

I always thought I was decent. Not great. In Austria, for the league, I was great but it was a bad league... Then here, it's not the best league, but it's an okay league and I'm doing decently.

The ease or difficulty of a participant's acculturation process had little impact on one's perceived performance. Majority of participants indicated having struggles adjusting to both host culture and high performing culture but these struggles didn't necessarily affect all participants' perceived performance. Minor themes, such as level of the league and coaching styles did occur in some experiences.

4.4 Summary

The acculturation process of seven women who play professional indoor volleyball internationally can be understood in two segments. The first, acculturation process within host culture, and second, the high performing culture was also analyzed. The host culture experience had two themes; *out of place* and *relationships*. The first theme *out of place* described how the majority of athletes experienced the feelings of discomfort, confusion and awkwardness when interacting with the host culture. Majority of the out of place theme derived from a mixture of behavior, appearance and communication differences between cultures. Athletes described their experiences interacting with the host culture as challenging, but eases over time. The challenges ease in relation to how quickly participants learn how to operate within the host culture. Participants who became more involved with people within the host culture tended to feel less out of place because they either learned the appropriate cultural responses or because they created a place with other teammates where they felt as though they belonged. Other participants learned the minimum requirements to operate in the host culture for the length of a season while limiting the interaction with the host culture, perhaps to feel less out of place.

The second theme *relationships* describes the impact of relationships on the athlete. The essence of this theme relates to how athletes interact with their support system from home and with relationships in the host culture. Value is placed on contact with existing friendships and family members, whether it be in person or through a device. Athletes appreciate shared language, and will gravitate towards it. This theme showcases feelings of homesickness, loneliness and gratefulness. This theme captures the impact relationships have on the athletes' well-being.

Experience within the high performing culture showed two major themes. These two themes were *expectations* and *foreigners versus locals*.

The third theme *expectations* highlights the standards of performance the professional team's coach and managers have for the seven professional athletes interviewed. The essence of this theme describes how athletes react to these expectations. Athletes compare the expectations of their collegiate career and their professional career. The feelings within this section are nervousness, focus and indifference. The fourth theme *foreigners versus locals* demonstrates the division of athletes that occurs on each participants professional team. The foreigners consist of any team members not from the host country and the locals are team members from the host country. The essence of this theme exemplifies how athletes experience their teammates in the professional high performing culture. Participants value shared communication and helpful teammates. The impact of the acculturation process had on the athletes perceived performance did not provide major themes across all all participants. However, had a subtle theme *initial adjustment*, which consisted of high performing culture differences in coaching style and level of league, were mentioned infrequently. This chapter presents findings that describe how athletes experience the acculturation process of competing professionally in a country other than their own in in both the host culture and high performing culture and how the ease or difficulty of that process affects their perceived performance. The evolving themes and sub-themes are presented in Figure 3:

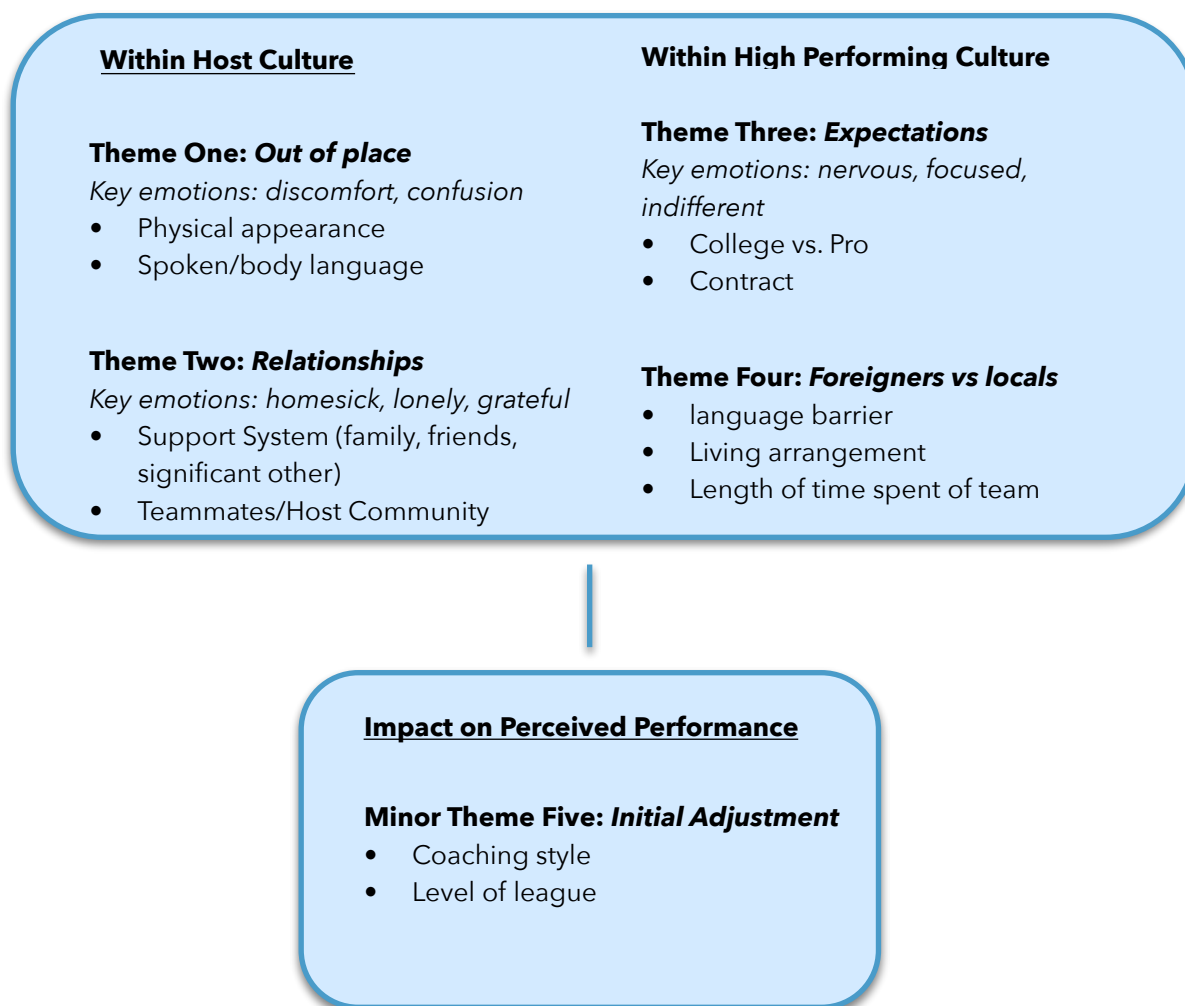


Figure 3: Demonstration of themes

5. DISCUSSION

I don't know, I'm just blessed... I'm getting to experience these different cultures and play the sport that I love. My experience has been, in general, really great. I think that I really like learning about new cultures and going to new places so that has been part of the reason why I'm still playing and why my experience has been so great.

— Jazmine, **Hungary**

This phenomenological study explored the experience of seven North American women competing internationally in professional volleyball leagues. I was interested in discovering how these athletes describe their experience interacting within the host culture and high performing culture and how it affected their perception of their performance. I was interested to see if the experiences and the emotions felt during the acculturation process were similar between participants. This study can provide insight for fellow researchers, sports representative agents, international volleyball league management, professional team staff and owners as well as athletes. The intention behind this study was to add a unique intercultural and acculturation perspective to existing literature and to explore if there are any unknown factors within the acculturation process. The experiences of seven professional athletes competing in five different European countries were captured through face-to-face interviews using video-chatting applications, transcribed and coded by emotions and shared experience, organized into five total themes and then separated into host culture and high performing culture. This Discussion chapter weaves together the literature and findings and discusses the implications of the results to athletes and professional stakeholders.

Connecting to the literature:

In Chapter 3, a foundation of literature within the intercultural communication realm was established to provide an understanding of past literature on culture shock, intercultural communication, and the acculturation process in which to base this study. Literature covering organizational culture within the workplace, organizational culture within elite sports teams, the culture shock international students and international student athletes provided insight into what to look for—as well as compare to—within the acculturation experience of professional athletes competing overseas. Although past literature does not specifically explore how North American women who compete in professional indoor volleyball internationally experience a change in host and high performing culture or their perceived performance while adjusting to it, highlighting similarities and differences against existing literature is needed in order to show the implications of this study. This chapter will present the literature again and show the parallels between it and the themes of the athlete experience in the new host culture, high performing culture and its effect on their perceived performance.

The empirical studies done on organizational culture provided an understanding of group dynamics that this study can compare to within the athletes relationship experiences in the host culture and the high performing culture. Weese's (1995) study stressed the importance of togetherness, respect and a family feel in a group culture as it affected the group's belief in their organization and its goals. In other words the more energy and time people invest into cultivating relationships, the more they buy in to the mission of the group. Similarly, Cresswell and Eklund's (2007) study suggested that burnout syndrome—feeling unmotivated and disconnected— was

associated with weak relationships, due to poor communication and a lack of honesty and openness. As suggested in these studies, strong relationships are necessary in order to cultivate a good working culture and improve the morale of the employees. This study analyzed the host culture and high performing culture of professional athletes and how they interacted with teammates and coaches as well. Parallels can be made between the empirical data and the high-performing theme *foreigners vs locals* where participants who had welcoming and friendly teammates who invested their help and time to newcomers felt more at home or more connected. The divide between locals and foreigners only caused discomfort when there were not many other foreigners for the athlete to connect with. For example, Autumn, in Turkey, felt burnt out and lonely because she only had one friend on her team who spoke english. Other participants had other North Americans and english-speaking foreigners with whom they could connect with, who could teach them about the practice environment and what to expect. Differences between empirical studies and this study are the unique communication barriers and intercultural differences between the employees (or the athletes) that can make it more difficult to relate, communicate and cultivate relationships among colleagues.

Cruikshank (2013) more recently conducted a study describing that group culture can be shifted and improved. It portrays that culture shift must come from the group members themselves. It must start with members working with each other to create standards, beliefs and unity. Cruikshank acknowledges that group culture can be improved by management or those in charge using manipulation. This manipulation comes in the form of forcing team bonding activities that focus on group-generated and regulated values, standards and practice. Although few participants indicated some teammates were helpful and they spent time outside of practice together, there

was no mention of group-oriented goals, whether they were pre-existing or created by the team.

The change in culture affected participants whether it subtly or significantly made them feel out of place. The frequency and severity of feeling confused and discomfort varied from participant to participant but consistently appeared across data creating the theme *out of place*. Past literature on culture shock analyzed culture shock amongst international students, American employees traveling overseas for work and international student athletes coming to school in the United States. Choi and Chung (2014) conducted a study on international students studying in Korea and concluded that students who reported an increase of stress due to culture shock in the beginning of their acculturation process were more likely to be depressed. This is seen majorly in one participant in particular, who along with it being her first season, also experienced significant differences between her home and host cultures. The difficulty she experienced while trying to get used to language barriers and Turkish culture both on and off the court was high and definitely affected her well-being. In this thesis' study of professional athletes, majority of participants reported changes in culture but not extreme changes. So although majority of athletes experienced culture shock it was not always extreme. Finding are similar to Choi and Chung's study, where the more athletes felt out of place—where they were experiencing culture shock—the more frequently they felt homesick and lonely, especially when relationships were weak within the host culture and high performing culture.

Participants experienced culture shock as a result of a change of culture and lacking the skills required of them in communicating interculturally. Ma's (1999) study on American employees working abroad showed the difficulty of acculturation when they were unable to complete international assignments because they were unable to adjust. Parallels can be drawn to the

athlete experience, where Brooke was terminated for being unable to acclimate to the high performing culture and the expectations the coaches had of her within it. Similarly, Nikki left the Italian league she competed in a few months in for being unable handle the lack of close relationships in the host culture and unable to acculturate to the high performing culture. When participants adjusted, culture shock faded and surprising situations became less frequent as athletes learned the correct cultural responses. Truax's (2008) study—also on American employees overseas—analyzed the factors that contributed to a successful intercultural experience and decreased culture shock. The key, he found, was that participants needed to be able to fully immerse their mind and body in the new culture. He stressed the importance of developing relationships with others within the culture to increase the chances of a successful experience. Parallels can definitely be drawn between Truax's study and this study of athletes competing and living overseas. Athletes who were able to make relationships within the host and high performing cultures didn't report feelings of homesickness and loneliness as frequently as those who didn't. Additionally, some athletes who made relationships in their new environment adjusted to it faster due to the extra help and insight in how things were done. The majority of participants in this study expressed the natural divide that occurred on most teams between foreigners and locals. There could be a relationship between this separation of foreigners and locals and some prolonged symptoms of culture shock among participants. Additionally, strong relationships with support systems may hinder athletes' ability to fully immerse themselves, because, as Autumn mentioned previously, constant contact reminded athletes of their families and sometimes made participants sad following speaking to their support system.

The effect of the acculturation process and culture shock on the athlete's performance in

Blount's (2012) study on international student-athletes at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) suggest that there are multiple factors as to why the athlete experienced a change in game statistics—or in this study's case, performance. The international student-athletes at UHM named multiple reasons for a decrease in their performance. The majority listed culture shock and homesickness as the main factors, followed by the coaches and team, and finally changes in performance climate and regulations. Parallels can also be made between Blount's results and this study. First, the seven professional athletes did not conclusively indicate a relationship between the ease of their acculturation process and their perceived performance. Some factors within the process affected some participants and they were majorly environmental differences to get used to, such as coaching style and level of the league. For example, Alexis commented on her decrease in performance due to the lower level of talent of those around her. One participant commented on the difficulty adjusting to the new ball. Expectations from coaches caused some anxiety while performing at times but didn't necessarily affect the actual performance. These factors, however, were not repeated frequently enough across all participants experiences to be named major themes. Like Blount's results, reasoning behind changes in performance were due to multiple factors within the athlete's new culture. It varies athlete to athlete and from place to place.

Finally Schinke's (2013) study of elite international athletes competing in North America found two key themes in their acculturation process. The first was the navigation between home and host community cultural norms, and the second, the theme of acculturation loads, where he explains that the acculturation experience is shared by both the person coming into the new culture and the locals receiving the newcomer. The shared acculturation loads theme is not repre-

sented in the current study. The navigation between home and host culture can be seen in this study's *out of place* theme, where participants struggle between the intercultural responses that are automatic from their home culture, and lacking the knowledge of the host culture responses. Navigating between home and host was experienced by athletes while living and competing overseas.

Overall, the similarities are evident between North American professional volleyball players playing internationally and past empirical data on international students, Americans working abroad and international student and professional athletes playing in North America.

7. CONCLUSION

I'm just blessed... I'm getting to experience these different cultures and play the sport that I love. My experience has been, in general, really great. I think that I really like learning about new cultures and going to new places so that has been part of the reason why I'm still playing and why my experience has been so great.

— Jazmine, **Hungary**

The sport of volleyball has been rapidly growing over the past decade, providing more opportunities for young athletes to travel abroad and have a paid career in sport. Although other studies provide information on intercultural communication, little analysis on the unique, high performing experience of professional athletes has been done. Investigating the phenomenon that exists relating to how athletes experience the transition from collegiate to professional volleyball and how they adjust within the host culture as well as the high performing culture is at the core of this research project. I wanted to see how the process affected the professional athlete with a rigorous regime and their perception of their own performance. I aimed to explore this unique dimension of intercultural research that was unexplored. To accomplish this goal, this study posed two main questions. *What is the acculturation experience of North American women playing professional volleyball living and competing overseas in a different host culture and high performing culture?* and *Does the ease or difficulty of acculturation affect the athlete's perceived level of athletic performance?* The acculturation experience of these athletes varies from athlete to athlete, but their experiences together brought forward some themes. The acculturation

process of seven women who play professional indoor volleyball internationally can be understood in two segments. The first, acculturation process within host culture, and second, the high performing culture was also analyzed. In this study, the host culture experience had two themes; *out of place* and *relationships*. The first theme *out of place* described how the majority of athletes experienced the feelings of discomfort, confusion and awkwardness when interacting with the host culture. Majority of the out of place theme derived from a mixture of behavior, appearance and communication differences between cultures. Athletes described their experiences interacting with the host culture as challenging, but eases over time. The challenges ease in relation to how quickly participants learn how to operate within the host culture. Participants who became more involved with people within the host culture tended to feel less out of place because they either learned the appropriate cultural responses or because they created a place with other teammates where they felt as though they belonged. Other participants learned the minimum requirements to operate in the host culture for the length of a season while limiting the interaction with the host culture, perhaps to feel less out of place.

The second theme *relationships* describes the impact of relationships on the athlete. The essence of this theme relates to how athletes interact with their support system from home and with relationships in the host culture. Value is placed on contact with existing friendships and family members, whether it be in person or through a device. Athletes appreciate shared language, and will gravitate towards it. This theme showcases feelings of homesickness, loneliness and gratefulness. This theme captures the impact relationships have on the athletes' well-being. Experience within the high performing culture showed two major themes. These two themes were *expectations* and *foreigners versus locals*.

The third theme *expectations* highlights the standards of performance the professional team's coach and managers have for the seven professional athletes interviewed. The essence of this theme describes how athletes react to these expectations. Athletes compare the expectations of their collegiate career and their professional career. The feelings within this section are nervousness, focus and indifference. The fourth theme *foreigners versus locals* demonstrates the division of athletes that occurs on each participants professional team. The foreigners consist of any team members not from the host country and the locals are team members from the host country. The essence of this theme exemplifies how athletes experience their teammates in the professional high performing culture. Participants value shared communication and helpful teammates. The impact of the acculturation process had on the athletes perceived performance did not provide major themes across all participants. However, had a subtle theme *initial adjustment*, which consisted of high performing culture differences in coaching style and level of league, were mentioned infrequently. This chapter presents findings that describe how athletes experience the acculturation process of competing professionally in a country other than their own in both the host culture and high performing culture and how the ease or difficulty of that process affects their perceived performance.

Although the acculturation experience is highlighted with challenges, such as feeling out of place, the trouble cultivating relationships within the host culture, meeting the expectations of coaches, and navigating through a sometimes divisive high performing culture between the foreigners and locals, the participants overall acculturation experiences were positive. All of the challenges contributed to personal growth, says Autumn:

I think the good times are when you have a good day here and you just—the sun is shining or I don't know, you just get to get out, and you're realizing that your growing as a person because you're experiencing all these things and going through it. When I see myself in a situation that I was terrified or made me panic or uncomfortable when I first got here and I know how to handle it totally... it's kind of comforting to know that you've grown through it, I guess.

The majority of participants express gratitude for the sport, which not only helped them grow as people, but also allowed them to travel the world and taught them that they are capable of much more than they thought.

7.1 Limitations

A limitation of this study is that the results cannot be generalized from the smaller sample size. Another limitation of this study is the lack of range geographically. Participants not only are from similar areas in North America, but they all also compete in Europe. This limits the analysis by excluding the professional athlete's acculturation experience with other cultures in other international leagues. The participants studied compete majorly in Western Europe, making the potential for recording extreme culture shock or acculturation experiences limited.

7.2 Future Studies

In order to gain an understanding of the acculturation process in general, more dimensions of intercultural research should continue to be conducted. By exploring multiple perspectives and their experiences with intercultural communication and the acculturation process, exist-

ing themes can be supported, or not, depending on what results the exploration of new experiences discover. The information gained from the seven qualitative interviews from this study brought forth the challenges of those living and competing overseas. Without much empirical data on the quality of life of athletes competing overseas, there is no avenue for aspiring professional athletes to learn of the experience prior to leaving for a career overseas, unless one personally knows someone whom they can ask. On top of that, because of the lack of knowledge in this area, more research needs to be conducted in order to help athletes better understand the process and their rights. More research in this area could better the legal conditions of athletes and potentially lead to a regulatory board similar to the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) in the United States to protect the athlete.

Future studies should explore a wide variety of players who also experience other regions such as East-Asian and South American leagues. Although in-depth interviews uncovered a lot of important information regarding the experiences of women playing professional volleyball in international leagues overseas, future studies could include more open-ended questions to identify other important issues facing professional athletes, such as “What are concerns you have being a professional athlete?” That being said, a specific study of professional athlete contracts could be interesting and helpful in potentially transforming the well-being and treatment of athletes by team owners and coaches. Future studies should explore the experiences of professional athletes on a larger scale, of both men and women and within multiple sports.

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APPENDIX A: Salutation Email

** The following copy will be sent to participants who match participant criteria, and answered “yes” to being willing to to participate in a 30-45 minute interview about their experience as a professional athlete within the screening survey they filled out.*

University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa
Salutation email attached to consent form
 Allyssah Fitterer, Principal Investigator

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION & PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS ON THE ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCE OF NORTH AMERICAN WOMEN COMPETING INTERNATIONALLY AT THE PROFESSIONAL INDOOR VOLLEYBALL LEVEL

Subject line: University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa research study consent form

Aloha!

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study. If you are receiving this email, you have indicated in a recent survey that you would be willing to participate in a 30 to 45 minute interview about your experience as a professional athlete.

If you are still interested in this opportunity, please fill out the attached consent form and email it back to this email address (fitterer@hawaii.edu). It will explain the following regarding your participation in the study:

Activities and Time Commitment

Benefits and Risks

Privacy and Confidentiality

Voluntary Participation

Additional Questions & Contact Information

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing back from you!

Mahalo,

Allyssah Fitterer

Graduate Student, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa
College of Communication

APPENDIX B: Interview Questions

Qualitative Interview: Rough guideline questions for athletes

- **Age:**
- **Nationality:**
- **Country Competing in:**
- **Number of International Seasons:**

Questions:

1. How did you come to being a professional athlete? What has it meant for you to play professionally?
2. If this is not your first time living/competing overseas, what was your first season like? Please share your experience. (ex. What was your experience the first couple days when you first got to your new living space? and competing space?)
3. What are the differences between your home and the host culture you are in now? Experience any difficulties? (understanding host culture cues, language, gestures, religion, traditions, etc.)
4. During your stay so far, is there any experience while interacting with the local people that stuck out to you? Why did it stick out to you? Please explain how you felt, behaved, and how you tried to understand the situation.
5. Was there a time where you thought the coaching style was different or strange. Please explain how you felt, behaved, and how you tried to understand the situation.
6. Did your team do anything to help you get used to your new home/environment (cultural norms/practices)? What did they do?
7. Please describe how you felt being far from home for this amount of time? (How do you combat homesickness, and how do you find ways to do that.)
8. How has your daily life changed living in a new culture? How have the differences between here and home affected you personally/emotionally? Please explain.
9. Can you remember a time where you experienced difficulties interacting with the host culture? Team culture? (think something was strange?) Please explain how you felt, behaved, and how you tried to understand the situation?
10. Can you describe differences between your old collegiate team and your professional team? How have these differences affect you personally?

11. How would you compare your performance professionally compared to your collegiate career? If you think it is different, what do you think affected or caused the change?

APPENDIX C: Consent Form

Consent Form for Interviews

University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa
Consent to Participate in a Research Project
 Allyssah Fitterer, Principal Investigator

Intercultural Communication & Professional Athletes: A study on the North American female athletes' experience with culture shock and the acculturation process at the International professional indoor volleyball level

Hello! My name is Allyssah Fitterer and you are invited to take part in a research study. I am a graduate student at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa in the Department of Communication. As part of the requirements for earning my graduate degree, I am doing a research project within the field of communication. The purpose of my project is to evaluate the experiences of professional athletes living and competing overseas. I am focusing on North American professional female volleyball athletes living and competing overseas in countries other than their own.

Activities and Time Commitment: If you participate in this project, I will schedule an interview via a video chatting app you have access to at a time convenient for you. The interview will consist of 11-13 open ended questions. It will take 30 to 45 minutes. Interview questions will include questions like, “What were your expectations before traveling to live and compete in a new country?” And “Overall, how do you think your transition from your home country to your new one is going?”

Only you and I will be present during the interview. With your permission, I will audio-record the interview so that later I can transcribe the interview and analyze the response. You will be one of about 10 people I will interview for this study. I may hire a transcription service to aid in transcribing the audio to expedite the process for the time-sensitive reason of submitting my thesis on time to graduate.

Benefits and Risks: There will be no direct benefit for participating in this interview and I believe there is little risk for participating in this research project. There may be times where you will experience discomfort or stress while answering any of the interview questions during the interview. You have the choice to skip questions, stop the interview and take a break or withdraw from the research study altogether at any time you experience discomfort or if you change your mind about participating.

Privacy and Confidentiality: I will keep all study data secure on a password protected computer and phone. Only my University of Hawai‘i advisor and I will have access to the information, unless I use a transcription service. If a transcription service is used, I will ensure that the audio recording and transcription is deleted directly from any other device other than my own. Other agencies such as The University of Hawai‘i Human Studies Program has the right to review research records for this study.

After written copies of the interviews are completed, the audio-recordings will be erased or destroyed. When reporting the results of the study, your first name will be used to separate the personal experiences within data but your last name will not be used. I will possibly disclose your nationality as well as the country in which you live and compete in. I will not use any other personal identifying information that can identify you to protect your privacy and confidentiality to the extent of the law.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this project is completely voluntary and you may stop participating at any time. If you wish to remove yourself from the study, there will be no repercussions or loss for you.

Additional Questions & Contact Information: If you have any questions about this study, please call me at (517)-488-4476 or email me at fitterer@hawaii.edu. My committee chair, Dr. Hanae Kramer, is also available to answer questions at hanae@hawaii.edu. Any additional questions about your rights as a research participant can be answered by the UH Human Studies Program at (808)-956-5007 or uhirb@hawaii.edu. Due to the time changes between you and I while I study and conduct research at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, please check the time zones before reaching out over the phone.

If you agree to participate in this project, please electronically sign and date this signature page and email it back to me. If you cannot electronically sign, please print, sign, and scan the document, then email the scanned page. If you have difficulties with either of those options, please call or email me to find a solution. Please save this document on your computer, or print it for your records.

Signature(s) for Consent:

I give permission to join the research project entitled, Professional Athletes Abroad: A study on the North American female athletes' experience with culture shock and the acculturation process at the International professional indoor volleyball level.

Please initial next to either "Yes" or "No" to the following:

___ Yes ___ No I consent to be audio-recorded for the interview portion of this research

Name of Participant (Print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Signature of the Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

Thank you!